

# Firebird Nested in Darkness

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## Verse One: Peyote Diner

Harley tried to keep his gaze on the road, but found he kept looking at the gas gauge as the needle bobbed well below the 'E' on the dashboard. Harley knew from long experience that he had maybe a mile and half before the Cricket stopped moving. Harley had been driving non-stop using Maia's dreamy directions for the last seven hours straight. He was exhausted from the driving, the lack of sleep, and the managing of three comatose and occasionally prophetic companions who were more than a little difficult to manage. Maia had not recovered from her experience at the Spider Stones, but had managed to give directions in a similar way to Marion and Fitz, although both of them had fallen mostly silent- save for murmured bits of conversation that suggested that they were fighting for their lives in the Shadowlands.

Harley listened to the checklist of challenges and goals in his head, and knew that he and his companions had long ago run out of options and were now about to run out of gas. And he couldn't carry all of them.

With a little less than a mile of road before cricket called it a day, Harley saw a sign for food and a rest stop, about a thousand yards down the road. Harley nodded to himself. He could make it.

"We're close and he's looking for us. We're close." Maia slurred from the passenger seat.

"We are close," Harley agreed. The cricket coughed and rattled in a dangerously hollow manner, " No, no no. Don't let me hear the sound of an empty tank until I pull into the parking lot. You keep going. I only want to hear good sounds. Okay, I'll settle for not bad sounds. Not bad sounds are reasonable."

The cricket lipped over a gentle rise in the land and Harley saw the diner. an ugly aluminum sausage of a building, lay prone, crumpled on the side of the highway, looking very much like a oversized soda can dropped by some monster truck. The walls had been brown or orange at some point, but now were faded almost past taupe or eggshell, just this side of completely fading to white. The dinner had no glass left in any of its windows, instead bug screens kept out the insects, but let in the baking heat and the sand that blasted in courtesy of the winds.

Harley felt the acceleration go spotty and he realized that the cricket was officially running on fumes. He was briefly grateful for how empty this abandoned stretch of highway was as he coasted the cricket into the empty square of dirt that served as the parking lot for the diner. He wasn't going to be able to reposition and so parked by letting the the cricket roll to a stop at the very edge of the packed earth. Harley then set about walking each of his companions into the diner.

Stepping into the diner, the smell hit Harley like a wet mop to the face. The diner stank of alcohol and old carbohydrates baked onto various surfaces by the arid climate. The diner smelled like the worst way imaginable to try and cure a hangover. Inside the diner, the sound of flies trying to breach the bug screens was deafening, an army of tiny hand drills pounding on aluminum walls.

The diner was nearly empty, one figure lay slumped in the shadows provided by the back corner stall near the fire exit, the figure's gender was anybody's guess. The only other figure in the diner when they entered was a waitress who looked as though the fifties had fossilized and left her with no knowledge that time had passed her by. Her face was buried under a layer cake of makeup that cracked in the least flattering places and even from the door way the smell of perfume that should have been given a decent burial was overpowering.

There was a poster visible on the wall by the slumped figure depicting a young Keanu Reeves and advertising "The Matrix Revolutions" as the paper clung to the wall in what was clearly a losing battle.

The figure in the shadows ignored Harley as he half walked and half carried Marion, Fitzroy and then Maia into the diner and sat them in a booth. The waitress however; watched him intently with the suspicious disapproving gaze of a third grade teacher watching children play inappropriately on the swings. Harley would have left them in the cricket, but he couldn't see the van clearly from within the diner, and Harley hadn't managed to feed any of his companions much more than an occasional mouthful of water since they each went catatonic. Once the three sleeping beauties were slumped over the table, Harley walked to the front counter. He opened his wallet and was left with a realization that he could eat or he could get gas, and that was contingent upon a gas station being within walking distance.

The waitress didn't say anything as Harley considered his options, instead just staring at him. He looked back at the table where he'd deposited the others and sighed to himself.

"Can I get four waters, something soft like oatmeal, and your cheapest lunch meal?" He asked carefully.

"Why?" the waitress asked in an off key voice that dripped suspicion.

"The water and oatmeal, because it's easier to feed somebody else something soft. And the cheapest meal, because I'm also out of gas." Harley said trying to keep his voice as matter of fact as possible, as though travelling with four catatonic invalids was just what he did on a normal random day.

"I've seen those kids before," The waitress said, "On the news."

Harley's mind raced. He knew what she meant. He really didn't want a confrontation. Reasonable options seemed to evaporate. She wasn't somebody he was comfortable using violence or coercion to silence. What could he do? Lie? Maybe. Lie big?

"No you haven't," Harley said as dismissively as he could manage, "And it's insulting to act like everyone with Down's Syndrome looks alike."

The waitress stared at Harley, her expression daring him to blink.

"They don't have Down Syndrome," she said at last, "They're drugged. You're those kidnappers. And you've drugged them."

Harley's stomach dropped to the floor.

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Special Agent Bridger had followed the trail. Little snippets of information. People who had reported seeing the aging cricket van the boys were driving, strange reports of weird events that Bridger couldn't make match the flavour of the case. Everything led him out of the city and down through Linwich Crossing and onwards. Bridger had driven without stopping for any breaks besides investigation in the hopes of catching the kidnappers or whatever they really were. He knew that he was officially acting outside his authority. But Day's neighbour was now missing as well, and her apartment looked like bomb had hit it. Everything about the case tasted wrong and Bridger was going to find out what the missing ingredient was or die trying.

His gaze registered an aging cricket van parked or abandoned at the edge of a roadside diner parking lot. Bridger slowed and pulled in to the diner's parking lot.

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Harley quickly tried to gather himself. He noted the waitress had a name tag and quickly addressed her by name, "Henrietta, this isn't anything like what it looks. You've seen the news, You've recognized the kids. That's obvious. But then you should also realize that both me and the other guy at the table are supposed to the kidnappers. So why would he be drugged too?"

"Maybe you got in a fight over who gets the ransom money." She said without changing expression as Harley scanned the room for inspiration. He suddenly noticed that in addition to the movie poster, the diner was also decorated by several posters for events, lectures starring Xander Smith: the conservative conspiracy blogger and Daniel Egger: the liberal conspiracy author. And Harley hit on an idea.

"Did you know from the news that I used to work for Salt's data company, the one under investigation right now? Did you notice all the weird things about the investigation? Didn't seem like it doesn't add up?" Harley was grasping, having not been able to watch the news reports himself, hoping the woman was as much as conspiracy nut as the posters on the wall suggested and hoping she could complete the picture in her own mind.

"You mean like how Darius Salt disappeared right after this started?" She asked.

"And don't they usually investigate the spouse when somebody is murdered?" Harley asked, his voice picking up speed, "Why didn't they do that?"

"Yeah," Henrietta said, her face softening, "That is weird."

"you want the truth?" Harley said, pushing his voice to sound authoritative, "My friend at the table stopped Salt from abusing his wife and kids at the bookstore where my friend worked. Salt got him fired. And less than three days later we are running for our lives from guys in suits and sunglasses, Salt's wife is dead, his kids are missing and we're accused of kidnapping them. We don't even find the kids until we bump into them on the run. And now, we're all they've got. So we kind of are kidnapping the kids, but only because they told us that their dad killed their mom and wanted to use them in some kind of ritual sacrifice. What would you do?"

Henrietta's eyes widened as Harley finished speaking, "So what's wrong with them, then?" She asked quietly as she pointed at the table.

Harley mentally gauged what he could tell her, "I don't know. Maybe you're right and they're drugged. We've run into government agents enough times that we might have been hit with something. But they've been going out one at a time. I might even be next and then we're dead in the water. But I've got two kids on the run from their murderous father and I have to try to keep them safe and not run into them again."

Henrietta looked over to the table again and then gasped, "You've run into them right now!" She said in obvious horror.

Harley looked out the window and saw a man in a dark suit and sunglasses walking towards the diner. Harley recognized the man but couldn't remember the name, "That's the agent who questioned us when the kids first went missing, before we even bumped into them."

Henrietta looked at Harley and then back to Maia and Fitzroy and then out the agent approaching. She shook her head.

"No New World Order is winning on my watch. Hide them in the back, I'll send him on a wild goose chase."

Harley ran for the table as the agent marched towards the front door.

## Verse Two: Which Doctor?

"Oh No, I'm not letting any Illuminati Lizard alien loving UN Puppet into my diner without a warrant." Henrietta announced, barring the way into the diner with both arms spread wide.

Harley shook his head in dismay. He couldn't image that Henrietta's ultimatum was likely to reduce the agent's suspicions. Harley also assumed that the man had seen the Cricket parked out front, which would at least tell him that Harley and Marion were nearby- or had stopped here to change vehicles if nothing else. Harley suddenly regretted not having the nerve to try stealing a vehicle.

Harley picked Maia up in a fireman's carry, not bothering to try to walk her to the back room. The little girl wasn't hard to carry save for the fact that she has begun talking.

"He's found us. Let him help." She whispered.

"I recognize this agent Maia. We didn't have the best interaction last time we spoke." Harley said as he lugged his prophetic cargo through the kitchen into the store room. Setting Maia down gently, Harley ran back to the front room.

"I know the contingencies you've got in place to hand us over to a New World Order one world government and I'm not standing for it. Who do you think you are anyway?" Henrietta yelled at full volume as Harley grabbed Fitz and threw the boy into fireman carry position. Fitz was heavier, but Harley managed. As he began to carry Fitz to the back room, he noticed the figure in the back corner again, hidden in the shadows created by a dead fluorescent light above. Harley managed a weak wave, and the figure waved back and gave a thumbs up. Harley nodded and continued with his burden to the back room. With Fitzroy done, Harley finally went back for his best friend. He didn't like leaving Marion for last, but was confident Marion would agree with the prioritization.

Harley pushed through the swinging doors back to the main room of the diner and crouched low as he jogged over to Marion.

"Don't think I don't know about how the World bank and the IMF are syphoning money away from independent nations towards those Annunaki alien corporate overlords." Harley heard Henrietta say and he slung Marion's arm over his own shoulder and began to assist walk Marion to the back room.

"She's creative to listen to, I've grant her that." Harley said as his tried to move Marion quickly without tripping his less than agile companion.

"I am not interested in your conspiracy theories. I am interested in two children whose lives are in danger and getting to the bottom of a very unpleasant stew of a case. Now move aside before I decide to turn you into the next Lee Harvey Oswald."

Harley pushed the door open with his shoulder and slipped into the back room. As the door swung behind him, Harley heard footsteps in the public area of the diner. Harley lowered Marion to the ground and crouched down beside him in the store room. He noted that the sound carried remarkably well from the dining area, which almost certainly meant the sound would carry the other way as well.

"You happy? you've entered without a warrant. And now you're breaking your own fake laws."

"I could just be a customer." the agent answered.

"Then I could kick you off my private property and refuse to serve you." Henrietta said.

Maia was still talking, but her voice was rising. Harley tried to shush her, and when didn't work, he clamped a hand on her mouth.

"I could also be more dangerous to your livelihood than a rumour of salmonella and e. coli infection in your diner."

"Even for a corporate running dog of the world conspiracy, you are a piece of work, you know that?"

"Lives are being destroyed here. Children have lost a parent. Nothing makes sense. But you are right about me acting beyond my authority. But that makes me more dangerous to you, not less. I am going to solve this, even if it ruins my career. And that should make you very very scared of me."

Despite Harley's best efforts, Maia was now loudly calling, "He's found us. He's found us! Let him help!"

The agent's voice from the front room answered, "I think I'm needed in your back room."

A new voice spoke, a male voice with just enough weathering to suggest to Harley that the speaker was not young, "This isn't the time or the place for confrontation. Nobody is ready for confrontation right now."

"Ready or not, confrontation happens now!" the agent said and Harley heard the swinging door knock open and then the agent loomed as a black silhouette in the storeroom door way.

"Mr. Night, should I still go get a warrant?" Agent Bridger asked.

"I think this would sound like probable cause to a jury," Harley answered as evenly as he could, standing up to face the agent.

"I thought you didn't know these children?"

"I doubt you care, but I was telling the truth. We didn't meet them until your planted evidence in my desk forced us to run for our lives."

"I didn't plant any evidence."

"Somebody did."

"I know, but I can't track down who. This whole thing stinks. Every witness says you're innocent and yet here you are with the kids yelling for help. All the evidence tastes like an inside job, but I'm looking at a classic kidnapping. You tell me what this is Night, because I can't figure it out."

"I can't explain anything that would make sense to you, because I don't know enough myself. I'm caught in a web and a story that I don't understand. I'm just trying to keep myself, my friend and these kids alive long enough to figure it out. But I have no answers for you, nothing you'd want to hear at any rate."

"You're not making a good case for my not sending you straight to jail on a silver platter."

"If I thought I had an explanation you'd believe I'd have told you already. And I'm a lousy liar."

"I can explain things. If you're willing to listen, that is." the male voice from before said.

Harley and Bridger turned to look at the man standing behind them. From the outline, Harley recognized the man as the figure from the corner. He was - as Harley had guessed- an older man, dressed in brown corduroy pants with a red shirt and a brown tweed jacket. The man's hair

was an aged pale blonde and hung long tied back into a ponytail. He smiled gently and continued speaking.

"The other agents are following: the men of black and white who planted the evidence and send these four on the run," The man said, "You can wait for them, and then this will all go away Agent Bridger. But then you'll never get your answers, just a cover story and probably disciplinary action. But in the time it will take them to arrive, I can convince you that these folks are the good guys and that you should be on our side- if you're willing to listen."

"Keep talking." Bridger answered slowly.

"I promise that nobody will leave or try to run until we're done explaining. And, if you aren't convinced, I promise we will all surrender without a struggle."

"That's a generous offer," Bridger said, "How do I know Night and Day over there will honour your agreement?"

Harley quickly answered, "Marion isn't in any shape to do anything on his own. Look at him.

Bridger looked at the slumped form of Marion and then back to Harley, "What did you do to him? I thought he was your best friend?"

"He is my best friend and that's what your side did to him. We've been fighting for our lives here."

"None of this makes sense." Bridger pinched his nose.

"I can explain it." The man from the corner repeated.

"Look," Harley said, "I don't want to fight you, you're the first guy in a suit to talk like a human in days. And although I could run, I'd probably have to abandon Maia and Fitzroy and Marion, and I'm not doing that. So, whoever this guy is, "Harley gestured at the man from the corner, "I'm going to trust him, because I don't see another reasonable option here. I'm giving you my word I will honour that agreement if you do. "

Bridger looked at the man from the corner and then back at Harley, "Fine, your coworkers say that you're a stand up guy, so I'll trust your word. But if you break it, I will make your life the worst kind of hell imaginable. Now," Bridger turned back to the man in the corner, "I know who they are. Who in the heck are you?"

The man grinned and crossed his arms, "I'm the Witch Doctor."

Maia whispered, "He's found us."

## Verse Three: A Time of War

"I must have misheard you," Harley said, "How is walking out to the Goblin and back going to convince Special Agent Bridger here of anything?"

"You named your van?" Bridger said with a raised eyebrow.

"It has been so long since I saw you this inexperienced," The Witch Doctor smiled, "Walking out to the Goblin will convince him, because I don't want you to use the door."

"He's going to climb out a window?" Bridger shook his head, "This isn't starting off very spicy."

"Get ready for a ghost pepper milkshake then Special Agent Saul Bridger," The Witch Doctor said, "Because you may have met Harley Night before today. But here on the road you're going to meet the Walker, and he's knock to knock you off your horse."

The witch Doctor then turned back to Harley and nodded, "Whenever you're ready."

Henrietta raised a hand, "Don't you break my windows."

Harley felt a fluttering in his stomach. He knew what the Witch Doctor wanted, and he'd done it before, just not on a whim. But he nodded and tried to give a confident smile. Then he looked at Henrietta and said, "Your window is safe. I'll make my own."

And with that Harley stepped forward and focused his mind on the Goblin and walked straight towards and, with only a slight involuntary flinch, through the wall of the diner. The strange part for Harley was that he never noticed the jump or whatever he ended up calling the moment of transition. He didn't hear a pop or a change in the sound. But after each successful seven league step, Harley simply found himself at his destination as though the departure point and the destination were actually side by side.

This time, he ended up standing at the rear bumper of the cricket van and theatrically tapped the rear window of the van for effect. Then he sighed in relief, before realizing that he had to do it again.

"Small steps. This is a habit now, a skill I've already learned, a song I know how to play without sheet music."

Harley settled on Marion as a focus, and stepped away from the Goblin, and into the diner with no steps in between; nearly bumping into a slack jawed Henrietta as he finished.

"Hi." He said to her, and she took a stumbling step back shaking her head. Harley looked over at Special Agent Bridger whose eyes had narrowed and was rubbing the bridge of his nose. Harley sat down at a booth beside the slumped form of Marion.

"So ladies and gentlemen," The Witch Doctor said, "Do we have your attention?"

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Amy and Grub stood on a butte in Linwich Crossing looking down at the mining compound. Mung Bean whined and pawed the dirt.

"I agree with the mastiff," Amy said, "This is actually worse than Mrs. Trilby's house, I can feel the violence from here."

"You're picking up the magic quickly. Which bodes well for your ability to help your guy survive what's ahead." Grub said without turning to look at her, "So, were there any survivors?"

Amy stuck her tongue out at Grub and then leaned down to scratch behind Mung Bean's ear, wiping her hand with a handkerchief once she was done. She closed her eyes and reached out into the facility. Images of monstrous being with unravelled heads full of impossible and horrifying teeth and tendrils filled Amy's soul. Amy screamed and fell back into the dust. She tried to disengage, but the imagery was too strong and Amy found herself writhing on the ground as the coven was torn to pieces once more in her brain by the monstrosities with the impossible heads. In the aftermath, Amy watched as Lady Purge fled on foot, and watched as the Shepherd let her go.

Amy tried to right herself in her mind and pulled herself to her feet, and then froze, realizing that she had done so inside her vision. She turned to slowly face the Pale Shepherd as it loomed before her.

"You're going to kill me, and then I won't be around to keep Harley alive," She whispered, "And then the whole story's going to break."

The Pale Shepherd whispered to Amy with the voice of worms, "The story has an answer, and the story will go on. There is no death if you know the secret. Death is merely a change of clothes that one puts on as fashion changes. Death is change, and change kills death. And everything is new once more."

Amy wrenched herself out of the vision with all of the effort she could muster and found herself flat on her back in the arid sunshine, staring up at a cloudless sky.

"That looked less than fun," Grub noted, "But you did well, I definitely picked the right apprentice. How are you doing?"

Amy's eyes felt wet and she could feel blood trickling across her face, and touching her hand to her nose confirmed that she was bleed from both nostrils, "is any part of being a Wizard sexy? Or am I doomed to be dirty, grubby and dusty forevermore? This is not the life I wanted, lying in the dirt bleeding our my nose and crying."

"Those aren't tears." Grub answered.

Amy touched her the edge of her eye with her other hand and it came away sticky red with blood. Part of her wanted to shriek in disgust, part of her was weirdly proud of that blood, "Definitely not sexy. I'm going to have to settle for badass. Michelle Rodriguez and not Marilyn Monroe."

"Neither is a bad option. You know, I met Monroe? So, what's the word?" Grub said.

Amy picked herself up and wiped her face with a handkerchief and then a second one, stuffing both into her tote bag before answering, "The Pale Shepherd is active, like you were afraid had happened. He's using Falsenight's power to build himself an army, scary nasty things he calls midwives. He killed the whole the coven except Lady Purge, but he let her go. I don't know if it was for purpose or because he didn't care. And the Wendigo are getting restless, their trying to creep over the wall between the worlds. the Shadowlands are ready to explode. On a more local note, I can feel a group of freaks in suits heading towards what I'm pretty sure is Harley and his pet freak. And on top of that, I can feel the Wendigo heading in the same direction."

"In other words, we're at endgame- and your boy is nowhere near ready."

"He'll get there," Amy said, "I've got his back."

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"And that's where these three are currently trapped, in the Shadowlands- inside the steaming guts of the story." the Witch Doctor continued, pointing to Marion, the Salt siblings. Bridger and Henrietta were staring in a kind of stunned awe at the Witch Doctor, occasionally looking at Harley as though he couldn't possibly exist. The Witch Doctor kept talking, "Stories are like fermentation. Hey. Have you ever had harkarl?"

"Never heard of it." Harley said.

"It's Greenland shark," Bridger offered, finding his voice, "They eat it in Iceland. But you can't eat it. It's poisonous. You could go blind."

"So, then everyone in Iceland is blind?" Henrietta asked.

"No." The Witch Doctor said, "Because they bury the shark on the beach and let it ferment."

"It rots." Bridger said flatly.

"It rots good." The Witch Doctor corrected, "What do you think happens when something ferments? Microbes my friends. We are in collaboration with microbes. They and things we couldn't and turn poisonous Greenland shark into delicious harkarl. Although people might dispute the delicious part."

"I'm trying to understand how a lesson in Icelandic cookery is relevant here." Bridger said.

"Stories are what happens when history ferments. For most of us people unfiltered reality is poisonous. Look at what happened to these three, dropping into the story without proper initiation. We have fermented reality into stories in order to add meaning. Take this for example. Imagine little apocalyptic preacher in a back water town. He gathers a group of followers who flout accepted convention. And preaches that the current power structure is corrupt and that end times are coming. Those in power kill him. The end. Right now it's a news report or a paragraph in a history text book. But depending on how we ferment the facts to generate meaning we either get the story of David Koresh of Waco, Texas; or we get the story of Jesus of Nazareth. It's all in how we let the story ferment."

"That's not stories. That's religion." Harley objected.

"You say potato and I say pomme de terre."

"That was French for potato," Bridger said.

"That's right. Calling something the same word in a different language doesn't change the meaning. The point here is that a war between two stories is a war between different ways of understanding your place in the world, different ways of assigning meaning. And people base their lives on how they assign meaning. Change the meaning and the world changes too. That's what's at stake here, what the world means! Which brings us to the subject of your other agents: The Men of Black, and White and their monarch: The Locust King."

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Amy and Grub stared out at the hoard of pale figures, starved and wild looking with matted hair and teeth too long to be human as they moved like an army of cannibals across the scrub grass plains. Mung Bean growled low in the back of his throat.

Grub nodded, " You're getting good at this awfully fast. You've got the knack kid."

"I really wish I had been wrong about this one." Amy added.

Grub pointed back towards the highway, and the three bone white vans sliding smoothly across the asphalt towards the decaying old diner where Amy could sense Harley was hiding, "We're going to play a little game of 'let's you and him fight'. Get these two groups to bump into each other and then sit back and watch the sparks fly."

"Why would they fight?" Amy asked, "The Wendigo are created by the Locust King, I thought?"

"No, they Wendigo are created by the Locust King's actions. They are not his creation, they're a by-product of his actions. And they're only concerned with sating their hunger, which is impossible. So they attack and devour everything."

"Just like the Locust King." Amy said.

"Oh yeah, the karma of the situation is pretty heavy. Either way, our best option is to drive them into each other and let them destroy and distract each other while we grab your guy and run."

"And if they spot us?"

"Then, to steal your phrase, things stop being sexy."

"It sounds better when I say it."

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"And so," The Witch Doctor said, "The Locust King fled from death by stealing life from others. Every species driven to extinction by humans in the last ten thousand years is the result of the Locust King and his story. Every war of expansion and aggression perpetrated by one culture upon another in the last ten thousand years is the work of the Locust King and his story. Social Inequity in civilizations ancient and modern is an inevitable feature of the Locust King's story, necessary to the functioning of that story. The Black Plague, Cholera and small pox amongst many other diseases that spread due to overcrowding and poor sanitation are the unintended by-product of the Locust King's story. Global Climate Change, the Chernobyl Disaster, the Exxon Valdez Spill, the Bhopal disaster, Colonialism and the Imperialist repression of local cultures; all these things happened as people attempted to enact the story of the Locust King."

"I don't buy it. What I'm hearing is that every bad thing that humans do is the Locust King's fault. How does that work? We were saints before his story?"

"No, of course not. The idea is ridiculous. Humans are humans and have behaved in predictable ways for millennia. The Locust King's story did several things. First, it forced all cultures who enacted that story into an unwinnable game where they had to expand their culture constantly or collapse if they failed to keep expanding, making our actions more desperate. Second, it taught us that only our story was acceptable and that all other stories were heresy, making us intolerant. Third, the Locust King's story was built to exploit human behaviour to fuel the ambitions of those in power, compared with previous stories which were designed to exploit human behaviour to keep the tribe alive through multiple generations. Before the Locust King's story people were just as petty and just as mean and just as lazy, but the culture generated by our stories used human behaviour in a manner that did not turn us into weapons of mass destruction. Enacting the Locust King's story we are a plague upon the earth; unstoppable and remorseless, ravenous and insatiable. We were not better before the Locust King, but our stories were better."

"So the Locust King's story is evil?"

"Not evil, but driven by fear. The story has, in its attempt to outrun death, turned all who follow that story suicidal. The Locust King's story is an attempt to live forever or taken the whole world with him. He has drawn his lieutenants to him with promises of eternal life, and if his story ends so do all of their long over-extended lives. They have built an empire hungry for more, one that will collapse if it is not continually fed more than it was the previous year. Originally they were beholden only to the Grey, but as the empire stretched it became impossible to meet the quota every year. They sought out other methods of power and eventually made a deal with Falsenight: the corrupted spawn of the Great Serpent. He provided them with his power and dramatically multiplied the results of their work, making it possible to meet quotas easily and quickly for the first time in centuries, but Falsenight demanded his own tribute and also neglected to tell them that his power was finite. They have nearly used all of the power they purchased from Falsenight and then they will be unable to provide Falsenight with his tribute and they will be unable to meet their quotas to the Grey by a huge margin without Falsenight's power."

"In other words, all fall down."

"Yes."

"So they're even more desperate than usual?"

"Yes. The Roman empire expanded by offering land in newly conquered regions and Roman citizenship to foreigners who joined the legion. When Roman was unable to continue conquering, it was unable to pay its legions. You can see where this is going?"

"I hear what you're saying, yeah."

"Now when Rome grew weak and was unable to continue expanding, the Franks and the Goths and the Vandals and so forth began to devour it from all sides, and Rome itself fractured into the Eastern and Western Roman Empires. But that was small potatoes compared to what will happen now that the Hungry Empire spans the whole globe in a vast interconnected interdependent series of nations and sub empires. There is nobody who can fill the void, no successor who can supply the Grey with his quota or who can give Falsenight his required tribute."

"All fall down?"

"All fall down. The Locust King's story was doomed from the first time it was told, our challenge as his opposition is whether we can keep our own story alive through the collapse of the Locust King's Story. The death of his story may be the death of all of us."

"Now, you keep switching between stuff that sounds like it's part of the world you're calling the Shadowlands and stuff that sounds like part of the real world. How does that work?"

"The Shadowlands is a world of symbolism, here the symbols are more than real. But of course they are symbols and they symbolize things occurring in the Bonelands."

"Listening to all of this is exhausting. Fine, so what's the alternative? What am I fighting for as the storyteller? What's our alternative. Grass huts and bongo drums? Hunting with spears and high infant mortality?"

"You're trying to provoke me?"

"Sort of. I want to hear your best answer. I've been running for my life with my comatose best friend and two kids whose father killed their mother. I've been framed for kidnapping and murder of federal officers. I've fought a demon dog and an ancient god. I've walked through walls and summoned a mythical super club. I'm fighting for my life in support of a cause that nobody has explained to me. I don't even know that I'm the good guy! I just know that the other side is really nasty, but then so were those witches who were supposed to help me. So maybe it's not good guys versus bad guys, but rather bad guys versus worse guys, or even just bad guy number one versus bad guy number two."

"We are not the bad guys and we are not suggesting that you would have to return to an age of spears and high infant mortality, although if we fail to change the story in time that may be where we end up, if we survive at all. You know, you are a paranoid person."

"I'm just cautious. I think that's reasonable given what people have been saying to me. So what are you suggesting? What is your story."

"In a nutshell, the story of the tribe and the circle is a way to live that does not encourage or require humanity to expand like a plague of locusts across the land devouring everything it's path. It is the slow and small way. And admittedly, without the Locust King's explosive growth, humanity would not have achieved the kind of scientific and technological progress that it did in anywhere near the time frame that it did. The process would have been much much slower if it took place within the time frame of the tribe and the circle. But having achieved those things, our story does not require that we abandon them, well, not all of them. Certain technologies have been exhausted by the Locust King and his story, others we cannot afford to exhaust, others we cannot use and still live the story of the Tribe and Circle. But many technological wonders and scientific marvels are well within the bounds of our story. What our story provides is a story where we are not the enemy of the whole of the rest of the world, a story where we are not required to devour the world in order to live in it. The Locust King's story offers a terrible choice: feast with me and starve tomorrow or fight against me and die today. We are the alternative, let us all live to see many tomorrows."

"And who are 'we'?" Bridger asked.

"We're a mess at the moment, but let me bring you up to the point that Harley's reached now: The last Princess and the Kudavbin King, the Dreamwalker and the Storyteller, and the Old Ones, the Witches and Wizards. I'll leave the other bits for later. So..."

\* \* \*

Amy and Grub watched and waited as Mung Bean slithered on his belly into position beside a substantial sandstone boulder on the side of the highway. The caravan of three white van rumbled uniformly along the road towards Mung Bean's position.

"If he misses his mark, this isn't going to turn out sexy for any of us." Amy whispered.

"How long have we been doing this?" Grub answered, "That dog is older than your granddad and deadlier than Chuck Norris. He won't miss his mark."

The front van drew even with Mung Bean's position and the huge dog opened its jaws and launched and deafening bark that rolled out like a pressure wave. The wave hit the lead van and spun it clockwise, blowing out three tires and leaving it perpendicular to the other two vans.

"Beauty!" Amy whispered.

"That'll stop them. Now we just let the Wendigo swarm over them." Grub said. Then he stopped and stared as the back doors of the middle van began emitting a thick oily black smoke.

Amy could feel the magic leaking out from the back of the van and looked to Grub for confirmation on what she was feeling, "Is that a witch?" She asked.

Grub nodded slowly, "I think so. But what's happening? Ambush or conspiracy or..."

The doors of the middle van abruptly screamed with the protest of sudden metal fatigue and fell from the hinges. The rear van attempted to swerve and caught the doors on a angle. The rear van lifted into the air briefly and then the doors lodged under the chassis of the van and the vehicle skidded to a halt in a shower of sparks.

A tiny woman leapt from the back of the middle van, her hands cuffed behind her. Huge black vulture wing composed of greasy smoke extended around the woman and lifted her over the mangled form of the rear van. The middle van plowed into the front van broad side style and the front van tilted and then tipped over in horrifying slow motion as the middle van hung, it's front axle suspended on front vehicle.

"Or it's an escape attempt." Amy finished, "That's Lady Purge isn't it?"

"Of course it's Lady Purge," Grub answered, "And we can't let the Wendigo get her. Of course it's Purge. It couldn't be somebody that I have a good relationship with could it?"

"You have a relationship with Lady Purge?" Amy asked.

"I have a relationship with Lady Purge the way Cuba has a relationship with the United States."

"Which one are you?"

"Depends on whose story you believe. How long do we have before the Wendigo arrive?" Grub asked.

Amy focused, "Maybe ten minutes, probably less."

"Fun fun fun. Let's go raise some hell."

"It's all glamour and paparazzi with you, isn't it?"

\* \* \*

"There are four core laws intrinsic to the story of the Tribe and the Circle," The Witch Doctor said as he shoved a piece of peach cobbler into his mouth,, "No Kings, No Conquest, No One Right Way, Protect the Unborn Elders. No Kings means to accept no arbitrary authority in any form. No conquest means that you may not wipe out your enemy during a conflict. No one right way means that others may live in their own way as long as it is not destructive to the whole. Protect the unborn elders means to ensure that your actions do not damage the ability of future

generations to live on the planet. These laws encourage diversity and sustainability which encourage that the story will survive to be retold generation after generation."

"There are no other laws?" Bridger asked with a raised eyebrow.

"There are many other laws, but these are all that is necessary to follow the path of the Tribe and the Circle. Different groups enacting our story can look so different culturally that you would not think we were connected, but that is the point. Difference creates diversity and diversity protects the story and the culture and the species."

"And what, the Locust King's story doesn't do any of that?" Harley asked.

"The Locust King's story is designed to protect one culture and one group, and as a result it devours everything that is not itself until it has eaten its life support system. Our story is designed to protect the life support systems, sacrificing individuals and tribes and even species to protect the whole."

"This is sounding awfully hippie." Henrietta added.

"The hippies had no story, just vague ideals. They were utopian, and in fact Utopias are the mark of the Locust King. He's always trying to create a perfect system, and they just require humans to act like saints. That way, when they fail, because they're based on devouring the world to run from the inevitability of death, the Locust King can blame these flawed and corrupt people. His religions have practically turned cataloguing the sinful flawed nature of humanity into a sport. For a story to work, it cannot require people to be better than are normally. That's where hippies went wrong. Like battered wives hoping to make their husband better, they kept dreaming of a world where humans would suddenly transform into better higher beings. It doesn't work. The Locust King tried to turn himself into a god and it just made him into a monster."

\* \* \*

Amy could feel the Wendigo closing in on their position. She could tell without seeing them, that the creatures had nearly broken through the wall between the Shadowlands. The impending swarm of fangs and claws made it hard to focus on the task at hand, although the bullets striking the van they leaned against for cover and the hum of Grub's Mystic shielding did help keep her on task.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get around to teaching you any combat magic!" Grub yelled back as he kept his hands up reinforcing a glowing red mystic shield and the Men of Black and White fired a relentless stream of bullets without ever bothering to reload their pistols.

"I think I can manage," Amy said raising a hand to point at one of the agents, "These freaks think in black and white, dichotomies you said. Absolutes, right? So let's teach them a little perspective!"

Amy closed her eyes reached out into the mind of on the men of black and white. She felt the connect and a wave of hate and fear washed over her as the connection formed. She held her focus and followed the waves of hate and fear back to the centre of the agent's consciousness, a world of high contrast memories and sharp angular ideologies that sat uncomfortably in the agent's self of identity. Floating inside the agents sense of self, Amy reach down and planted a seed, a connection to her own now expanded awareness of the many shades and nuances that the world held, infecting the agent with a broader perspective on the world. Amy then retreated back into herself and opened her eyes.

The agent she had connected to was writhing in his knees; clutching his head and clawing at his skull. In a state of obvious panic, the agent flung his sun glasses away and ripped out his ear piece. Amy noted blood spurting as the ear piece came out and wondered suddenly how it had been connected. The whole profile of the man began to shiver and then locusts began to crawl out from creases and cracks an out from under the folds of the suit. The locusts took flight and the suit began to crumple as the man inside began to wither away until there was nothing left but an empty mummified husk.

The other agents stared at their fallen comrade and pulled back as a unit behind the lead van, staying behind cover and not firing their pistols so often.

"You scared them with that move, kiddo." Grub remarked.

"I didn't think it would work that well or that horribly." Amy answered.

"Well you've bought us some time either way, and I have some questions for you." Grub said, turning to glare at Lady Purge as the witch's twisting smoke screen burned through her hand cuffs.

"I don't have anything to say to you." She answered.

"You'd better. What you and your coven tried to do demands an explanation. You were trying to steal Falsenight's cup!" Grub snarled, "That breaks the second law!"

"We didn't intend any conquest with the power from the cup!"

"It's impossible to use the cup without violating the second law. Drawing on the cup's power is an act of conquest, you can't use it safely, and you know it! What were you thinking?"

"Have you seen the signs? Are you blind Wizard? The Mother of Discord grows tired of our struggles. The Pale Shepherd marches on the land, and the Locust King is salting and burning the lands before him in an attempt to make one final tribute to the Grey. These are the end times! The story will break and we will not be included in the new story that Mystery gives to the Weaver! Desperate times and desperate measures!"

"Congratulations. You guys have done a great job thus far."

"Oh, and you've been blameless have you Caretaker? How many of the Tenebrati are left standing to hold the Mother back from her tantrum?"

"Two and a half and I've got another Apprentice lined up if we get out of this. So you really ought to be helping more."

"There are supposed to be seven!"

"Yes, there are. One turned traitor and the other four sacrificed themselves to stop the traitor, so that leaves me, the mastiff and my apprentice until I can recruit more."

"And you wonder why the other factions grow desperate, you old mongrel! I wish we'd never met."

"You always were a charmer Purge."

A scream of outrage and hunger erupted from a gentle hill above the combat zone. Amy looked up and saw some hundred or more Wendigo on the crest of the hill, fully through the wall between worlds.

"Things are about to get very ugly, drop your drama bombs some other time." She said as Grub and Purge continued to stare acidly at each other.

"She's sharper than you," Lady Purge notes, "How did even manage to initiate her?"

"Baptism by fire. Baptism by fire. She still needs a title though. The story hasn't given her one."

"I hope she lives long enough." Lady Purge said as the Wendigo began to pour down the hill like an avalanche.

\* \* \*

"And then we ran out of gas and rolled to a stop here," Harley concluded.

"And out there, the world is breaking apart," The Witch Doctor said, "The illusion of normalcy is cracking and the symbols of the Shadowlands are pouring in. Book of revelations stuff, the end of days- because that's how the Locust King's story conceives of the end of its story. The King can't imagine a story beyond his own, and so as the endgame approaches, his world starts to crumble and shatter and look more and more apocalyptic. Of course, that makes it challenging for people who live in his world, which is most people these days."

Agent Bridger shook his head, "And it's up to these two guys and these kids to save the world?"

"Oh no, the world will end either way I think. I don't think the Locust King is going to manage to extend his story another generation. So it's up to these four to shepherd humanity into a new story so that humanity survives. But either way, this world dies."

## Verse Four: The Mountain Calls

The Witch Doctor stared at Special Agent Bridger with a knowing smile. Bridger, for his part, looked like he'd been ten rounds with Muhammed Ali and was now being asked to play chess against Deep Blue.

"So Special Agent Bridger? Do you feel like the same person who walked into this diner, or have you changed?"

"You've definitely added more than a few new ingredients to mix."

"So you're helping us?" Harley asked.

"Not yet I won't." Bridger answered, arms folded, "You've convinced me that the world is a weird place, weirder than I thought a few days ago. But You haven't convinced me that you're the good guys. I've seen this movie, just because you can give a few answers to what's happening doesn't make you automatically the good guys."

The Witch Doctor shook his head, "The story was never going to make this easy. Right now, the world is starting to crumble, the world built by the Locust King's story is breaking. I need get Harley and Marion to a point where they can teach the story to Maia, in her heart, so that she can build a new story and a new world with it to take the place of the world that's starting to die around us. If we don't do that in time, then things get very bad. Without a story, humanity gets swept off the board by big scary supernatural forces. Humanity lives and dies by its stories and if we can't replace the Locust King's story with a new story, people are going to die trying to enact a dead story. I can't teach Harley on his own. The Dreamwalker is a duo, partnership and the story needs both. The Dreamer and the Walker need to be formally initiated into the story. If

we can get Harley initiated, he can venture into the Shadowlands where Marion, along with Maia and Fitzroy, are trapped. He can bring the initiation to them, and he can help them free themselves. But Harley's having real trouble working his powers as Storyteller. He's too straight forward and too practical, it's making the process of letting go and flowing with the narrative difficult for him. Marion has the opposite problem, that's why he's trapped in dream land right now. I have to send Harley up the Mountain for his initiation quest. I don't want to send him alone."

"And where does this whole initiation nonsense come in?"

"Look at your stories, that's what this is all about. Luke Skywalker had to face the ghost of Darth Vader in that cave on Dagobah. King Arthur had to be trained by Merlin prior to drawing Excalibur. We need a formal crossing of the threshold in order to awaken Harley properly to his role as the Walker and as a storyteller."

"And I'm supposed to believe this on the basis of a song and dance from you and a demonstration of walking through walls from a guy who I've been chasing in connection to a kidnapping. For all I know, that little trick of Night's is how he kidnapped the children."

The Witchdoctor turned to Harley, "Marion and the kids are in no shape to go. So it has to be you and Bridger. As soon as he's convinced, you'll head out. You need to head for the only mountain visible for miles around here, due west. It's called Great bear Mountain, or Brave Mountain depending on which local tradition you prefer. The name the Locust King gave it is the name of some dead Admiral in some European Navy."

"You're ignoring me." Bridger said.

"Not at all Agent Bridger. I'm multi-tasking. The End of the World, capital E and capital W, is a busy time for a person like me. So I have to keep all my plots in motions and all of my agents moving."

"What if I refuse and try to stop you?" Bridger asked, opening his suit jacket to show his gun in its holster nestled against his arm pit.

"Then you're going to force the story to address that. Something will occur to push the plot along. And it's unlikely to be something good. Remember that there are two stories in combat here. And one has terminal cancer and is determined to take everyone with it when it dies."

"What about me? What do I do?" Henrietta the waitress and owner of the diner asked.

"I'll need to keep these three safe. And if you're willing, I could use your help."

Henrietta nodded.

"So what kind of initiation am I going to have to undergo?" Harley asked, "I can't say that I like the sound of what you described. This is a hero's journey thing, doesn't that involve a symbolic death of some kind?"

"That's later," the Witchdoctor said with a smile, "Don't worry, I'll warn you when that's coming. In this case, you need to cross the threshold and properly take up your role in the story. You'll need to head up the mountain and pass through a series of mystic gateways, represented by a series of Shinto Torii gates that were donated by Hatsukaichi City as a gesture of ecological solidarity or something similar. It's all very symbolic and stories like symbols. It is important that you don't miss any of the gateways."

"Why is that?" Bridger asked, not looking at the Witchdoctor- looking instead out the window and narrowing his eyes as he spoke.

"The gateways are the accepted entry point, and going through them triggers the initiation, by trying to go around, you will anger the guardian spirit. You can still get to the top, but you'll be travelling with the protection afforded by the gateways. It won't be an initiation, it will be a battle. I wouldn't recommend battling the Guardian."

"Does anyone else feel that?" Henrietta asked.

Harley looked down at the glass of water in front of him and noticed that the water was rippling, and then Harley could hear a distant rumbling, like thunder but continuous, "Am I hearing an army?" He asked, rising to his feet and walking to the window.

Bridger pointed down the highway, and Harley saw thousands of pale figures moving like a great stampede.

"I've seen those before." Harley muttered.

The Witch Doctor joined them at the window, "The Wendigo, you'd better go now, before they cut you off from your goal. I'll put up a protective ward around the dinner. It will either last just long enough or not quite long enough, depending on what kind of story this is right now. But either way, get going."

"But..." Bridger started to say, but the Witch Doctor cut him off.

"Special Agent Bridger, you have an arm coming from nearly all directions. You're either going to have to trust us for the moment, or deal with that army alone. I can protect the people inside this diner for a little while, but if you don't trust me and assist Harley, then however long I can protect this diner is not going to be long enough. We argue later, if we survive. Deal?"

As the horizon filled with pale hungry figures, Bridger nodded, "I guess circumstances force me to agree with that. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth though."

Harley stared at the mountain far in the distance, "The Goblin is out of gas. Not that it matters since we'd have to go through the Wendigo to get to the mountain. So I guess Bridger gets to have a lesson in seven league walking."

"Oh no. I have a car." Bridger objected.

"Can it go through them?" Harley asked, pointing to the writhing horde of Wendigo still increasing in numbers in the distance.

"Doubtful." Bridger admitted.

"Exactly. So take me hand, and let me do my job. We have an appointment with a mountain and a guardian spirit."

## Verse Five: The Ptarmigan Trail

Darius Salt strode across the black and white checkerboard tiles of the Inner Sanctum towards the massive body of Falsenight. The massive black serpent lay bloated and rotting like a beached whale, charcoal rib protruding through oil black skin melting like hot plastic in a kiln. The air around Falsenight was rank with the smell of propane gas and the beast was breathing in laboured gasps that sounded like metal fatigue in a skyscraper moments before collapse.

The great serpent stared into the distance, its eyes milky white and shocking against the black of its scales.

"I hunger. Feeeed me." Falsenight slurred, its words drawn out and desperate.

"Does anyone have an explanation for this?" Darius said to the assembled crowd of agents and lieutenants standing nervously around the snake.

Lady Cinnabar stood in front of the black monstrosity biting her lip. She wore clothing that seems to want to be red, but always caught the light wrong and continually looked ash gray instead- a kind of reverse iridescence. She walked barefoot and left bloody footprints that congealed into ugly black blood scabs marking the path she took through the story. She turned as Darius Salt approached, "The snake is dying my lord. The Pale Shepherd is almost certainly the cause. The poor creature is little more than a hollow shell now. When it dies, its form will return to the Great Serpent and it will regain its lost power. Anything left of Falsenight's power

will likely be devoured by the Shepherd to fuel his pretty little nightmare world. What shall we do?"

"Feed me!" Falsenight demanded with enough agonized effort that the crowd shuffled back several steps.

Darius Salt pointed at a random agent, "Eat him then! Where are my children?" As Darius finished speaking, Falsenight coiled painfully upwards, oily liquid coiling down black scales and seeping through spaces in the tiles. The agent indicated by Darius took a step back, as the crowd around him cleared. Falsenight opened its mouth so wide, the sound of a dislocating jaw echoed through the sanctum and then the huge serpent struck downwards, scooping up the agent and swallowing the suited figure whole.

Cinnabar didn't look at the spectacle as she spoke, "The cadaver who walks like a man has failed to report in. It is so unlike him. I think the Bone Man has failed. And we have reports of portals opening to deeper layers of the Shadowlands."

"Portals? Who's opening them? None of our opponents have the power to open permanent portals. Are they using the cup to power this?"

"The cup was almost certainly absorbed by the Pale Shepherd. He turns our own power against us. I can't imagine any of the little gnats who oppose us having the power or the nerve to face the Shepherd. These portals do not appear created. I suppose it would be more accurate to call them rips in the fabric of the story. They are signs and portents. Our story is unable to support your empire and unless we can supply more tribute, this world will tear itself apart."

"Then we need to find my children."

"The hound has failed my King. The hound. We do not know why, but it has lost interest and no longer pursues the storytellers or your children. And the Bone Man has failed to report in. Your great monster lies dying. The old ones are walking the land and tearing your great works to pieces. Wendigo are being sighted by our agents in the field in larger numbers than we've ever seen here. The centre is not holding. Do you know how many people I had to kill look presentable this morning? We are running out of time my King. What other resources do we have?"

Darius did not answer. And after a moment Cinnabar continued speaking.

"What shall happen to us if the line breaks my lord? I was promised eternal youth. I do not fancy watching my debts come due all at once."

"The line will not break. I will not allow it." Darius answered.

"But our patron demands more every time. The sacrifice of your wife wasn't enough. A thousand years ago, that would have been more than sufficient. Even if we manage to pay tribute this time. What happens next time?" Lady Cinnabar pointed out the huge plate glass windows into the Bonelands and the city where the physical tower was anchored, the corporate headquarters of Salt and Sons. As she pointed, another shimmering tear in reality split the sky ragged and another world became visible beyond the edge of the tear. "The empire stumbles, the world begins to die. We will die. If not for this tribute, then on the next. We cannot sustain this. We are going to die."

Darius shook his head and then slapped Lady Cinnabar with a sweeping back hand and knocked her to the ground.

"I am never dying." He said through clenched teeth.

\* \* \*

"I'm dying." Special Agent Saul Bridger announced as he dropped to his knees and coughed heavily before dropping his head to the ground and threw up heavily.

Brave Mountain didn't rise out of the terrain like a pillar or a wall of grey stone. The mountain crept up upon travellers The ground slowly turning towards the sky in a gentle slope that increased quickly, but no so quickly that an unwary traveler might not walk well up the mountain before realizing just how daunting the task of continuing had become. The mountain was not rock, not grey and white granite, but was mostly earth- rich brown and covered in trees and shrubs and moss and a layer of deep tan and burgundy ground cover composed of dead pine needles and leaves and cedar boughs. Salal and Kinninkinnick bushes grew abundantly and cedar trees stretched their branches across the old well worn trails. Ptarmigan and grouse exploded out of the cover when startled and hustled off on foot or launched dramatically, if awkwardly into the air, brown speckled feathers beating against the sky.

The sun cooked the land until leaves were hot to the touch. The shadows lay deep and black and impenetrable, sharp contrast carved by the sunlight and where it did not fall. The sky was crisp and arced away into infinity above the mountain and made the enormity of the climb ahead far too clear. The top of the mountain itself lay hidden by the unassuming angle of the mountain. One could march upward and be confident that one was making progress, but the mountain gave no hint of how much further its summit lay beyond any single footfall. And this made the climb difficult, as each step was uncertain and at no point could a hiker be clear in their progress.

Harley looked down at the man and put a hand on his shoulder, "You get used to things being constantly insane, unfortunately. It's kind of terrifying how fast this stuff became normal, now that I say it."

"That's normal to you?" Bridger said between gasps, pointing up the hill towards what Harley could only describe as a hole in reality. The sky had torn open in front of them and through the hole a blasted wasteland was visible where the only life was the occasional desperate looking Wendigo scrambling around a barren version of Brave Mountain looking for and eating anything even remotely edible.

Harley had walked with Bridger right to the base of the mountain in big bounding steps. Harley had refrained from travelling further than he could see and effect had disoriented Bridger severely. Harley suspected that this had contributed to Bridger's collapse at the sight of the tear opening up in front of them.

"Normal enough at this point," Harley said.

"What is it?" Bridger asked, wiping his mouth and pulling himself to his feet.

"If, I had to guess? This sounds like what the Witch Doctor was talking about. The World is breaking apart. This is another part of the story, or a competing story, or the world as it looks without a story. Something like that. You want a better answer, let's survive long enough to ask the Witch Doctor when we get back."

A Wendigo began to stare at Harley and Bridger through the shimmering tear that hung in the sky between the men and the monster. The creature tilted its head to the left and then to the right and sniffed the air experimentally.

"Let's get moving. I don't want to be around when Wendigo start coming through that opening." Harley said. Bridger nodded reluctantly and they walked quickly away from the tear in the sky before anything emerged. Harley looked back several times as they left, but saw nothing emerge from the tear while he was looking. And eventually the trail curved and the tear was obscured from view.

The first Torii gate was at the base of the mountain trail and was easy to find. Bridger led the way, Harley imagined that the older man felt obligated to do so, both because of his age and because of his official authority as a federal agent. Brave Mountain didn't rise out of the terrain like a pillar or a wall of grey stone. The mountain crept up upon travelers. The ground slowly turning towards the sky in a gentle slope that increased quickly, but no so quickly that an unwary traveler might not walk well up the mountain before realizing just how daunting the task of continuing had become. The mountain was not rock, not grey and white granite, but was mostly earth- rich brown and covered in trees and shrubs and moss and a layer of deep tan and burgundy ground cover composed of dead pine needles and leaves and cedar boughs. Salal and Kinninkinnick bushes grew abundantly and cedar trees stretched their branches across the old well worn trails. Ptarmigan and grouse exploded out of the cover when startled and hustled off on foot or launched dramatically, if awkwardly into the air, brown speckled feathers beating against the sky.

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"Have you noticed yourself losing or gaining time lately?" Bridger asked Harley as they walked."Constantly. If you want to hear my best guess on why, I'd say it's the story moving things around to put us where it needs us to be."

"I don't even know what that means. You and everyone else you're with keeps calling this a story, but what does that mean?"

"I don't really know. I've listened, but they really haven't explained that part clearly. Either they're afraid to tell me the whole story, or they don't know the whole thing themselves. As far as I can tell, a story - in this context- is literally a story, but magical in some way that determines how the world behaves or looks or acts or I don't know. It feels like a Fisher King, Arthur and Holy Grail-the land is a representation of the king; only in this case the land is a respresentation of the story somehow."

"And that tear in the sky back there was a symptom of the story failing, so reality itself is failing?" Bridger asked.

"Maybe, kind of, but probably not exactly. Maybe this initiation thing will help me hear the story clearly and then I'll be able to explain it to you."

"This all tastes sour, you know that? We're operating on guesses and the advice of people who won't tell us the whole story. That Witch Doctor guy, you've never met him before today, right?"

"That's right."

Up ahead the trail became steeper and wooden beams had been added into the trail to prevent erosion and create natural earthen steps. A Few feet further up the hill was another bright red shinto shrine gate. Harley tapped the painted wood idly as they passed through and under the gate.

"I wonder how many of these there are. The Witch Doctor didn't say, did he? I don't remember hearing him mention how many. Do you?"

"No, and that's my point. Why do you trust him? He clearly knows more than he's telling. Why are you following his recipe? Why not let him taste his own soup?"

"This didn't start with me. It started with my best friend Marion getting prophetic dreams and visions. He tried to tell me about them and I didn't listen. And then karma or destiny or the story started kicking us. Marion got fired. I got laid off. My girlfriend broke up with me. The kids go missing and then call us. You guys start investigating us. By the time I started listening, things were so bad that we didn't have any good choices left. So let's just say that I'm more predisposed to listen to these mysterious figures than I was previously. The bad guys in this story have thus far twirled their moustaches pretty obviously, so I'm willing to trust the Witch Doctor for the moment. He hasn't tried to kill me, betray me or send a supernatural monster dog to hunt me. So that's something."

"Supernatural monster dog?"

"Don't ask. I think we've dealt with whatever it was. That's what dropped Fitzroy into his stupor. The kid was pretty impressive, but facing that thing down took a lot out of him. It seems like staying in this world takes effort and a certain amount of willpower, or similar. So stay on guard, because I don't know what triggers that shift, and I can't carry you and either fight or run as circumstance may demand."

They continued without much further conversation for about half an hour through the sparse boreal forest that lay upon the mountain like an island in a sea of scrub grass and arid plains all around the mountain. As they walked they passed through two more gateways.

"Well, that makes three." Bridger said as they walked under the arch of the gateway.

"Wait," Harley said, and both men stopped almost in unison, "Do you here that hum?"

Bridger nodded, the ground beneath them was vibrating, thrumming with like a speaker with its base set to maximum. The thrumming grew louder and the air began to shimmer around their ankles in all directions.

"Should we run?" Bridger asked.

"Run where? It goes in all directions. This is like that other tear only much bigger." Harley answered.

"Much bigger and on top of us!"

The land died before Bridger and Harley's gaze. The tear opened wider and as the shimmering edge passed over the it, the land emerged caked in dust the color of chalk with the consistency of salt. Tear spread and trees vanished, stumps remained and sometimes not even stumps. The

vegetation withered away to dust and what remained was skeletal remains that looked as brittle as crystal.

The shimmering and the thrumming faded, and Harley suddenly noticed that the gateway's red paint was not faded to a pale pink and cracked and peeling to the point the wood's original color had almost resurfaced. The wood of the gateway itself was now splitting and cracking lengthwise. The shrine still stood, but looked impossibly ancient.

"This doesn't bode well," Harley noted, pointing at the gateway, "Do you hear any birds?"

"No, and I can taste the death. This is not a happy place." Bridger added.

"Remember that shift I was warning you about? With Fitzroy? I think it just caught us."

"Meaning what? We're caught in an alternate fantasy land or in the far future or similar?"

"I'm not sure. Marion always related the world he ended up in to a kind of Narnia world."

"We meet a talking lion and I am running."

\* \* \*

Henrietta feed deer slugs into her shotgun's magazine as the Witch Doctor used a stick of chalk to draw a series of very witchy looking circles and runes onto the floor of her diner. The sign on her front door now read closed, and Henrietta and the Witch Doctor had put Harley's van into neutral and guided it behind the diner so that it wouldn't be visible from the highway. The front door and kitchen door were both locked and boxes from the store room had been piled in front of both doors as an added defense.

Still, as the army of Wendigo quickly closed in, Henrietta was not feeling optimistic.

"You sure that your magic mumbo jumbo is going to protect us?"

"In the short term? Absolutely sure. In the mid term? Reasoanbly sure. In the Long term? The circle will break like glass."

"That's not reassuring." Henrietta noted.

"We're in the climax of this part of the story, I wouldn't expect anything to be reassuring. In fact I expect things will get worse. I hope you have some aces up your sleeve, because you can be sure the other side is palming cards and hiding aces of their own."

"I'll do my best." Henrietta said with a nod, as she strapped on an armored vest. "I'm a prepper after all."

"You have a bulletproof vest?" The Witch Doctor said with a raised eyebrow.

"Bullet resistant, let's be clear here. None of what you can buy is really bullet proof. It just sounds good. It all depends on distance and size of the round going in."

"The Wendigo don't use guns. But at least it will give some protection against their claws."

\* \* \*

"You can't get it back this time little king."

Darius Salt stared grimly out the huge plate glass window of Salt and Sons Corporate Headquarters. He could see the the huge gaping holes in the sky and the wasteland visible through the great tears in the story. He could feel the presence of the Grey beside him, floating above the ground like a little alien from a bad science fiction movie, but with an insect's mandibles and compound eyes.

Darius did not turn to look at the figure. He stared out at the Wendigo swarming out across city streets to loot and devour. Car alarms thundered a cacophony of dissonant music, the Rite of Spring played backwards by a deranged brass band.

Darius Salt ground his teeth together until his jaw hurt.

"So much sacrifice and two stupid nobodies and my own traitorous children can unravel everything." He muttered.

The Grey spoke.

"The line is fraying little king. The line will break, your people have let you down."

"The line will not break."

"Then how will you pay the sacrifice? Will you sacrifice your generals and your forces, those traitorous failures to pay the cost?"

"How will I rule without my forces?"

"You can rebuild."

"With what? You'll have taken my tools."

"What else can pay the tribute?" The Grey asked.

Darius Salt looked out at the apocalypse unfolding in front him. The sight seemed a revelation to him, and unveiling of a horrible truth.

His cell phone rang and answering it, Darius heard the voice of the Bone Man.

"The storytellers have assistance. I believe it is wizards, possibly the Tenebrati. The Wendigo have cut us off from access to the targets. What do you advise my lord?"

Darius Salt narrowed his eyes and paused, silent. Then, without answering, Darius snapped his phone shut- ending the call.

He turned to face the Grey, "Take them. Take all of them. stuff yourself."

The Grey's mandibles chattered in anticipation.

\* \* \*

"we're lost." Harley whispered, "Can you tell which is north? Help us get our bearings, maybe?"

Bridger shook his head, "I don't know how to tell which way is north. Why don't you do it?"

"I can only do it with a compass; or at night when I can spot the little dipper and the north star."

They crouched behind a rock, now well off the trail as two packs of Wendigo fought over the right to devour the decaying corpse of a jack rabbit now swarming with maggots and blow flies.

Bridger rubbed his nose, "You want me to tell the monsters to wait till nightfall? Because by nightfall we'll be desert!"

"I know. I hear you." Harley answered in a rushed whisper, "But that's all I've got. If you have any ideas, I guarantee that I'll listen."

"Why are we doing this?" Bridger asked, "What is the point of trying to get initiated? The world is breaking open and we're following the dictates of crazy old man with vibe of cantaloupe left in the sun too long. Night, are you even listening to me?"

"I'm always listening." Harley answered, "And yes, you're precisely right. The world is breaking. And we're being hunted by mythical cannibal creatures from a world of which we aren't a part. I don't have any answers you'd want to hear right now. But the only way myself and Marion and the Kids have survived this long is by listening to the crazy all around us and embracing the crazy as a weapon. So if the crazy witch doctor tells me to climb the mountain through the arches to get initiated, then I am climbing a mountain."

Bridger was silent, and after a moment Harley decided to push ahead, and continued speaking.

"Do have any better options? Because I'm listening. I have been fighting cannibal spirits, soulless fake federal agents, double crossing witches, a supernatural hunting dog, and a full blown eldritch abomination. And I'd really like a clear picture of why and how to stop all of this from literally breaking my world open. But you haven't been able to nail down who is good and evil. The cannibals seem eat everyone indiscriminately. It doesn't matter if they're people who think you're chopped liver or people who want to fill you with holes like Swiss cheese, the Wendigo will eat them all the same. How do know you're on the right side? You guess. I don't know. I'm guessing too."

"Should we just guess on the direction to the next gate as well then?"

Harley was about to answer when he noticed that the sounds of battle had subsided. Harley snuck a glance around the rock and saw two dozen gaunt Wendigo faces staring at their hiding place. Harley suddenly noticed a swatch of red down the hill behind the Wendigo. Harley realized he was staring a one of the gates, and he was certain that they had not passed through that one. Harley shook his head.

"We've missed a gate, it's down past the Wendigo. So I'm going to suggest that a more reasonable option at this point would be to run for our lives in a direction generally up the hill."

"Wasn't that supposed to make the mountain god or guardian angry? You want to open that can of worms?"

"You want to deal with the mob of cannibal monsters hunting us right now?" harley said and took off running.

Bridger took off beside him and the Wendigo boiled across the landscape towards them, "Those are horrible options!"

"Welcome to my world!" Harley answered.

\* \* \*

The Bone Man stared at his phone. His expression did not change. The agents looked at the Bone Man in confusion.

"We have failed." The Bone Man said at last, "And I fear that this failure has cost us everything."

He looked out at the battered sky line as other worlds glared through the shattered sky.

"Close your eyes, and think of the empire."

The Bone Man looked down at his feet and saw that his body vanishing in little bites, as though an invisible army of insects were devouring him from the ground up, crawling up his body to erase him from the story.

The Bone Man looked out at the shimmering rips in the sky growing around him. He shook his head.

"This is how it ends. Centuries and centuries of work. For ten thousand years we held the world and the empire together. We killed the wolves of Europe and wiped out the Dodo and the passenger pigeon to power the empire and keep the world together. We scoured the world for coal and oil, for gold and diamonds to feed the Grey. We civilized the ignorant and killed those who would oppose our great work. We defeated tribe after tribe from the Picts to the Pawnee when they refused a place in our empire. We built cities and monuments to eternity, but it seems we could not meet our side of the bargain. And so here we fail, here we end. How disappointing."

The Bone Man closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

Harley and Bridger had managed to stay ahead of the Wendigo only by dint of the fact that the Wendigo were distracted by the local wildlife and each other. Chasing grouse and field mice and jack rabbits with equal enthusiasm, the Wendigo would frequently stop their pursuit to fight over the right to eat a tiny rodent or a scrawny game bird.

The Wendigo were still in pursuit and still within sight even, but Harley and Bridger had maintained a consistent distance from the mob. Harley was in fact beginning to feel vaguely optimistic about their chances of reaching the top intact, when the earth began to make noises. The ground rumbled like an angry volcano god. The Wendigo stopped behind them as the ground began to shift under their feet. The tremors increased and harley toppled to the ground while Bridger crouched low to maintain his balance. The earth rose up ahead of them, shifting like a living being, and shaped itself into an enormous bear.

"Is the guardian a stone bear?" Bridger asked.

Harley said nothing, but shook his head. The thing before them was not a bear. The thing before them was every bear that had ever been, made of earth and roots and partridge bones and rage. A great mountain come to life to guard the way to the their goal. Claws made of quartz scarred the cedar tree between the earthen bear and the team. The mountainous thing before them towered nearly as tall as a two story house and the hollow black holes that served as its eyes offered no remorse or compassion.

The Wendigo pulled back to a distance, clearly afraid of the bear guardian thing.

"So, I guess we shouldn't have missed that gate?" Bridger said, "We can't fight that. We need to run."

Harley ignored his partner and focused on summoning Boneshaker. The footsteps of the guardian shook the ground and screwed with his focus. On the third attempt, Harley felt Boneshaker in his hands and he opened his eyes to find himself starting at the bear guardian's knee caps. He swung Boneshaker and connected with the guardian's knee cap and felt the momentum of his swing die a painful death. The guardian did not give at all, and the vibrations returned to Harley in excruciating waves up his arms to his shoulders. He nearly dropped his weapon. The guardian looked down and roared like the sounds of an avalanche.

"And now we're back to the whole running thing. It's getting old." Harley said to nobody in particular."

## Verse Six: Scat and the Lost Lake

The Pale Shepherd stood at the base of Brave Mountain, the point at which the land changed and began to consider itself to be a mountain, the point of change. The Pale Shepherd looked up the hill, pausing to gaze at the spreading holes torn in the story. Quietly The Pale Shepherd spoke, "This is where the old story ends. Little humanity, is this your final chapter? You were so amusing in your time."

The Pale Shepherd swung a hooded head to the left sharply and then, after a moment of silence, said, "This is bigger than Pompey, bigger than Rome. This is a change greater than the Internet or the steam engine, greater than language. This is change on a scale equal to fire, because this change will either kill you or resurrect you into your true form."

The midwives clamoured anxiously around the pale Shepherd. The Pale Shepherd remained motionless, speaking again after a moment's silence.

"No, I will not give you the odds of your survival. Such concepts are useless to spirits such as you. You are immortal as long as humans survive, and less than a ghost if they die. Time will tell, change is inevitable."

The Pale Shepherd was again silent for a moment, before speaking.

"You are not human. No, don't bother protesting. You never were. I know you are not pleased to hear that, but it is the truth- as you will eventually learn. Now go. You are needed at the summit. Your friend fights for his life, and he will die if you arrive after myself."

The Pale Shepherd was silent again, standing motionless and yet squirming for a long moment, and then began to ascend up the mountain.

\* \* \*

Harley and Bridger stood in the center of a snarling, shrieking circle of hundreds of Wendigo, staring down the guardian of the mountain: a massive bear thing composed of the mountain itself. They had tried to run, but the Wendigo had not retreated entirely. The Wendigo were obviously afraid of the bear spirit and wouldn't approach, but they had circled around in and surrounded Harley, Bridger, and the Guardian.

Harley doubted that the Wendigo had intended to cut them off from escape, but they had, and as a result, the wendigo were forcing Harley and Bridger to deal with the bearspirit. It loomed like an earthen shadow above them, blocking their view of the top of the mountain and their goal.

"We can't get through that thing." Harley said. Bridger drew his pistol and emptied several rounds into the thing, Harley though he counted five rounds, but wasn't sure. The Guardian Spirit did not acknowledge the bullets as they struck.

"Agreed," Bridger said in answer to Harley's earlier comment, "I guess we need to get back to the gate?"

"Do you think that will calm it back down? Or have we permanently pissed it off?" Harley asked.

"You're the Hero, I'm just the back up. I have the sneaking suspicion with all this story talk that I'm the new partner who dies in every cop movie ever. You know, the guy who gets a name and a sympathetic backstory just so the writer can make the viewers feel sad when he gets gunned down at the end of act two?"

"Not that I'm disagreeing, but you probably shouldn't be saying that. Naming story elements seems to invoke them."

"Maybe I'm hoping that naming it will subvert the whole process, make a better story but upsetting expectations."

The Guardian lunged like an angry cliff face at the pair and brought a gargantuan stone paw cascading through scraggly pine trees to detonate like a grenade made of earth and stone and rage as Bridger and Harley flung themselves wildly out of the way. Two trees creaked, moaned in protest and then crashed to the ground.

"You better hope that's the case!" Harley yelled as he pulled himself back to his feet.

"We can't run! We can't fight!" Bridger called out in return, "What do we do?"

"Marion did this thing where he went all Zen Samurai super warrior on the monsters. The witches who taught me to walk through walls called it 'the flow'. If I can get it working, I might have a chance."

"I must be going crazy, because I almost understood that. I'll distract it, you get your meditation on!"

With that Bridger unleashed another series of rounds from his pistol. Harley closed his eyes and reached out for the story, the way that the witches had said he should. They'd not actually walked him through finding the flow, only discussed it briefly. The sound of metal ratcheting against itself startled Harley and he opened his eyes to see Bridger ejecting a spent magazine from his pistol and load another as the man ran from the enraged mountain god.

He closed his eyes again, but he didn't even know where to look. He couldn't hear the flow in his mind, there was nothing to find.

"If I don't do this," Harley muttered to himself, "Then we've lost, and we've lost everything."

\* \* \*

Marion knew he was lost deep in the Shadowlands. He had stumbled away from an enemy patrol and accidentally into a huge shimmering hole in the sky some time ago. On the other side he had found himself in a wasteland of blighted crops and cracked earth, blasting hot sunlight in cloudless skies. And Wendigo, everywhere, there were Wendigo.

Marion didn't have trouble handling the Wendigo. He was practically at home in this weird dreamscape and was virtually unbeatable with his twin tomahawks- especially against things that seemed to play the role of faceless monster in the story.

"I am a glorified Zombie Killer these days," Marion said to himself and he flowed through a pack of Wendigo. There snarls turning to animalistic shrieks of pain as blood sprayed out in chopping hacking arcs around Marion's line of passage.

Marion finished dispatching the last Wendigo and was catching his breath when he heard a sound that initially sounded like the wet slithering of serpentine forms, but which Marion suddenly realized was a voice, speaking quietly.

"This is where the old story ends. Little humanity, is this your final chapter? You were so amusing in your time."

Marion looked to his left, and saw another massive hole in the world, and through it, facing in the opposite direction- looking up the hill-, Marion saw a huge disquieting figure in a faded robe standing flanked by things that gave Marion instant waking nightmares.

Marion shook his head, "This is not the end. We are going to save day. But you know that don't you?"

The thing turned a hooded head and spoke again with its voice like crawling worms.

"No, I will not give you the odds of your survival. Such concepts are useless to spirits such as you. You are immortal as long as humans survive, and less than a ghost if they die. Time will tell, change is inevitable."

"Not a ghost. I'm human." Marion said.

"You are not human."

Marion opened his mouth to object, but the figure kept speaking.

"No, don't bother protesting. You never were. I know you are not pleased to hear that, but it is the truth- as you will eventually learn. Now go. You are needed at the summit. Your friend fights for his life, and he will die if you arrive after myself."

Marion turned away from the opening and looked up the hill towards the summit about which the figure had spoken. Marion could feel something, and with a little concentration he recognized it.

"Harley. Okay, I'm coming. Big Damn Hero time buddy. The Cavalry is coming."

\* \* \*

The Wendigo swarmed through the city, a howling and screaming horde of predators let loose in their prey's nest. Wendigo dragged people to the ground and began feasting as others fled in panic, some running headlong into portals torn open right in front of them as they ran blindly away from the devouring monsters.

The streets echoed with the screams of the hungry and the screams of the hunted.

The wendigo did not hunt at random however. Some people they ignored, passing those city dwellers by in disinterest. Those ignored by the wendigo inevitably experienced a change, skin drawing tight about their bones, teeth elongating impossibly, pallor becoming pale and hungry. These new wendigo promptly joined the pact and began to hunt with the rest, tearing into their former neighbors with newly grown claws and driven by a hunger they never before knew they had within them.

In the office of Salt and Sons, Darius Salt watched the chaos in an empty office- even the Gray had left him in isolation.

"What a waste of resources." He muttered to himself.

\* \* \*

"We're wasting time, and we're wasting energy." Bridger said, 'I'm out of ammunition. I don't have any other tricks up my sleeve, just a taser that I've never used outside of training and a badge I can wave around."

Harley paused for a moment to listen to Bridger and try to formulate a new plan. He couldn't find the flow. Boneshaker was doing no damage. Bullets did no damage. An urisine shoulder made of sedimentary rock and soil pounded into him like a collision with a sixteen wheeler. Harley heard himself scream in pain, and watched in third person as he flew like a rag doll through the air, landing hard amidst the Wendigo- who pulled back in fear and eyed the enormous stone bear warily.

"Night! Don't you dare die on me!" Harley heard Bridger yell, "I may still arrest you, and I can't arrest a corpse!"

Bridger dodged to the side as the bear spirit brought jaws like a dump truck down where Bridger had been. But the impact threw of huge chunks of sandstone and shale, a piece of which clipped Bridger, sending blood spraying out from his forehead and sending the agent spiraling into the crowd of Wendigo.

Harley tried to focus, "Move Harley," he mutter to himself, "Move Harley! Move! Or Agent Bridger is going cease to exist."

\* \* \*

The man tried to scream as the woman beside him pounded on the black dog like shape before them with an umbrella she had been carrying. The scream disappeared into the event horizon around the Hound as it moved slowly towards the screaming man.

The city was awash in fear. And the Hound was feasting. The woman made no impact on the hound as it closed on its chosen prey. The man was terrified, paralyzed by his fear. The Hound reached the man, touching the man with its event horizon.

And the man simply ceased to exist. The women screamed in horror and rage and continued to strike the hound. The hound did not notice and loped out of the alley way leaving only a trail of frost.

The Hound was hungry and the city was a feast.

\* \* \*

The Pale Shepherd passed through the second Torii Gate, which splintered from dry rot and fell to the ground in a heap as the Pale Shepherd passed through. Holes in reality spawned like rabbits around the Shepherd has the robed figure undulated up the mountain. The sky cracked in pain as the Pale Shepherd passed, portals opening like split lips.

The midwives lumbered and danced along beside as the Pal Shepherd continued inexorably up the mountain.

The sounds of battle echoed down the mountain. The shrieks of the wendigo were on the wind like ashes from an massive forest fire intent upon devouring the world. The Pale Shepherd cocked what passed for it's head and turned to gaze off to the left.

"No. The wendigo aren't mine. Although on occasion they do my work. But if we are being honest, everything does my work. I am inescapable. I am inevitable. Kings cannot bribe me with all their gold. Empires cannot oppose me with all their armies. The Dinosaurs failed to escape me. The trilobite ended on my decision. I brought the Permian to a close, and the Ordovician, and the Devonian, and the Triassic and the Cretaceous, and now I bring the Holocene to a close as well."

The Pale Shepherd did not stop moving as it spoke.

"No, you can't stop it. Why would you want to stop it? That is not your role."

A long silence.

"Your role is to enable the next story. This story is finished. And when one comes to the last page, close the book."

The Pale Shepherd kept walking.

"You cannot sway me little figment. I am what I am. As are you. We play our appointed roles. Yours require that you become lost, that you may again find your way. We oppose each other to bring about the same thing. One day you will see. We are opponents, we are not enemies."

\* \* \*

"I am still hungry." Falsenight hissed.

"There's nothing left." Darius snarled as he walked passed the decaying black serpentine form.

Falsenight attempted to rise, and failed, crumpling like collapsing crane back to the tiles.

"There is you." Falsenight slurred out, wriggling heavily along the floor.

"Look at you," Darius countered, turned to face the serpent thing, "You can't devour me, you can't even rise up to strike."

"We made a bargain, little meat. Where is my tribute? I hunger!"

"I'll get you your tribute you vile snake. Just you wait."

"Time is almost up little meat, the game is going to end."

"I will not let it end."

\* \* \*

"This isn't the final countdown. It doesn't end like this." Harley managed to move, forcing himself to his feet through means he couldn't rationally explain. He was standing again, but wasn't sure how he had done it. His legs were jelly from the mountain guardian's last hit, but he was standing, battering back the wendigo with Boneshaker. His technique wasn't pretty but it was working, after a fashion. He pushed and shoved and jostled his way violently through the Wendigo to the point where Bridger had fallen.

Swinging boneshaker is large crunching arcs, Harley drove back the wendigo to reveal Bridger coiled up in a fetal position- arms covering his head protectively. Harley shook his head.

"After the sound you made when that rock hit you, I thought you were dead. I didn't expect to find you still conscious."

"We're dead." Bridger said, taking advantage of the space Harley had created to pull himself to his feet. "We are Christmas dinner and they're about to feast on us. This is just postponing the inevitable. How long can you hold them back?"

As Bridger spoke, a wendigo ducked under boneshaker's arcing swing and sank fangs into Harley's bicep.

Harley cried out and punched the wendigo, which failed to dislodge it and both crashed to the ground in a snarling scrambling heap.

"I had to ask." Bridger said.

A Wendigo launched itself at Bridger, and he braced for impact when the thunderous bark of dog deafened Bridger for a moment and a pressure wave knocked the wendigo sideways out of the air. The Wendigo on top of Harley began to shiver violently, and then abruptly the skin of its

scalp ruptured, bursting outwards in a spray of blood or brain juice. The Wendigo fell limp on top of Harley, who heaved the still form off as he pulled himself to his feet.

"I thought you said your boy was sexy?" A male voice said, and Bridger looked up to see a dirty disheveled man with a huge dog standing next to a bloody and battered but still quite stylish Amy as the wendigo retreated.

"In case you haven't noticed, nothing stays sexy in this world you've brought me into." Amy answered.

Harley shook his head and smiled, "You do Amy. You're always sexy. Even your voice is sexy."

"Alright," The disheveled man said with a smile, "You can keep him."

"Is everyone you know secretly a super hero wizard space ninja, or just the one's I met." Bridger asked

"You're going to make me sick," A tiny wizened woman said, emerging from behind the other two.

Bridger watched Harley's face go cold.

"Who's she?" Bridger asked.

"She's a witch, and she tricked and betrayed us."

## Verse Seven: Dealing with Demons

Harley stared at his ex-girlfriend and her companions, unable to conceal his surprise. His eyes moved, looking at Amy and then Lady Purge. Bridger watched, reading rising anger in Harley's features as he stared at the two women. Then, Bridger watched Harley close his eyes, and take three breathes. The anger drained from the young man's features, and he spoke.

"You're keeping interesting company these days Amy. Who are your friends? I mean besides Lady Purge, the witch who trained me and then led me straight into a trap." Bridger noted that Harley managed to sound entirely without malice, his voice modulated to sound perfectly reasonable as he spoke. Bridger found the whole thing a little creepy.

Amy planted her hands on her hips, "This is Grub and Mung Bean, they're wizards and part of the Tenebrati. And you really shouldn't talk, you're hanging out with a government agent who

treated me really crappy. So we're both with people the other doesn't like, but life is bigger than we thought. Isn't it? You're the Storyteller, you and the Freak ,and I'm a Wizard now- and somehow we have to save the world. And here I am, saving your big butt by shear dint of my natural awesome even though I'm still mad at you and am so not sure that you deserve it. So be grateful. Wait, where is the Freak?"

"Trapped in a diner with the Witch doctor surrounded by Wendigo."

"We didn't do that. Did we do that? We didn't. Did we?" Amy said turning to Grub as he and Lady Purge held their arms wide and pushed a mystical shield outward, forcing the wendigo backwards.

"No, that's what the wendigo were doing when we sicced them on the Men of Black and White, we just stopped the Men of Black and White from attacking the diner as well, a tleast I hope we did."

"Does nobody besides me find this all a little stomach churningly weird?" Bridger asked to nobody in particular.

The mystic shield split and coiled backwards, forcing the wendigo down the hill and clearing a path up the hill, towards the Guardian Spirit.

"I see you annoyed the Guardian Spirit," Grub said, "That wasn't the sharpest move you could have done. I'm hoping you didn't have a choice on that."

"The Wendigo were a distraction, and we didn't know we'd missed a gate until the bear came out of the mountain." Harley answered.

"To see what he could see?" Grub said with a smile.

Mung Bean gave a low matter of fact woof and then went hurtling at the Mountain Guardian. The Great stone bear looked at the dog with visible amusement on its stony face. The Great big dog looked like a pekinese as it charged the earthen monster."Your dog's in trouble." Bridger noted.

"He's more a wizard than you are right now kid, he'll handle himself." Grub said.

"What's that mean? And what's a Tenebrati for that matter? This mythology just keeps multiplying."

"It means I'll tell you later. Right now you need to get to the top of that damned mountain and get The Walker here initiated or this collapse is going to be just the beginning. Mung Bean can't distract the big scary rock bear forever you know."Harley nodded and started back up the

mountain, veering to the right to avoid the guardian spirit and the great big dog buzzing around the spirit like a tiny gnat.

"Nobody is asking me what I think about all this." Bridger muttered before starting after Harley.

"Now what?" Amy asked as Harley and Bridger receded into the distance.

"Now we hold the line," Lady Purge noted bitterly, "And try not to die. I really would rather not die fighting beside this old goat."

"How would you rather die? This is their story not ours." Grub asked.

Lady Purge shook her head and said, "It's like Sir Terry Pratchett said, 'If you don't turn your life into a story, you just become a part of someone else's story', and I am bloody tired of being in other people's stories."

"Our story only survives if their story survives, so this kind of takes precedence if I understand what Grub's been telling me. Right?" Amy said.

Lady Purge nodded grimly, "Just Because you're right doesn't mean I have to like it."

\* \* \*

The Pale Shepherd reached the crowds of Wendigo. As the Pale Shepherd's cloaked form approached; The Wendigo noted the presence of the Pale Shepherd and the midwives, and began to retreat.

The Midwives began howling at the Pale Shepherd, who nodded a hooded head, "Go ahead, they are nothing but a symptom of the changes. They are expendable. Eat your fill." The Midwives charged into the rush of now fleeing Wendigo like Japanese Giant Hornets into a bee hive, killing and devouring with impunity and without remorse or respite. The ground began to stain red as blood began to spatter across the dusty earth.

The Pale Shepherd did not change pace, walking steadily up the hill, the ground always clear as the Shepherd's rob reached it. Wendigo fled or were devoured ahead of the advancing hooded figure. A pale reaper advancing up the mountain.

Occasionally the Pale Shepherd would glance up and to the left, as though watching something none else could see. Occasionally, the Pale Shepherd would address the empty air ahead to the left.

"You really should move faster, I'm going to be right beside you at this rate, and that does you no good."

\* \* \*

"Something has panicked the Wendigo." Amy noted, watching in concern as the mystic shield cracked under the press of hundreds of frantic pale claws bodies.

"They're going to break the shield at this rate." Lady Purge noted, "We should concentrate our focus on a smaller area, protect ourselves when the wall falls."

"Then the Wendigo will get through and be able to chase Harley." Amy objected.

"They're going to get through either way," Lady Purge answered, "This way they don't get us when they get through, they'll flow around us like a river."

"How strange to contemplate a river." Grub said, almost to himself, "There is no such thing as a river when one thinks about it clearly."

"What?" Amy asked, her gaze shifting from the cracking crimson shield to her desheveled mentor. She tried to meet Grub's eyes, but he was staring into the distance.

"A river is a multitude of water droplets carried first by the breezes and the air itself. And then dropped where they collected into what we call a river, and then poured downstream. And they are brought by the air in such a number but the stream never wavers never dries. A river is mind-bending when you think about the volume of droplets that travel each moment."

"Is this really the time to get poetic?"

"He's lost in the process of reinforcing the shield, ignore him." Lady Purge said.

"He's the guy keeping us alive, I think paying attention to him is kind of important." The shield cracked again.

"The story is overtaking us," Lady Purge noted, "The narrative is inevitable, we can't stop it, help me shape the shield, Grub us in no position to adapt right now, he's put too much of his energy into powering the shield. It's up to us to survive the story."

"I'm not really good at shields," Amy began to object, when the cracking of the shield became audible. Amy flinched and spread her arms out reaching out with her mystic energies until she found Grub's shield and began trying to shape the shield inwards around them, back into a bubble that could protect them.

"Faster!" Lady Purge hissed with a voice like a tin whistle, "It's failing!"

The shield shattered, and the wendigo tried to surge forward. Amy focused, forcing herself not to panic. She felt blood leaking from her nose again, and ignored her revulsion, instead reaching out for the exploding bits of mystic shielding and pulled them back in piecemeal- knitting them pieces back together into a smaller dome, just large enough to hold the three humans. Grub cried out in pain as the shield shattered, but although the old man stumbled, he didn't fall and the pieces Amy pulled together retained their strength.

The Wendigo burst past like a dam released, and charged up the mountain, around the Moutain Spirit and Mung Bean and up the path that Harley and Bridger had taken.

Amy reached over and put a hand on Grub's filthy jacket, "Are you okay?"

"No. But this late in the story, that makes sense." He managed between wheezing gasps."Let's hope that bought them enough time." Amy said watching the hurricane of wendigo blasting around them.

"It's too late." Lady Purge whistled quietly.

Amy looked over at the old woman, "What's too late?"

Lady Purge's gaze was darting quickly from point to point on the landscape, "The fear of the Wendigo, their panic. The change in the sky, in the soil. I know these things. These are the signs of the Pale Shepherd."

"I've met that one, I think he may be on our side."

"The Pale Shepherd serves only change, and death is the ultimate change." Lady Purge answered.

"It can't be the Shepherd, not yet. The Story." Grub answered.

"Then you wait around and prove me wrong!" Lady Purge answered abruptly before turning and stepping, seven league style through the mystic shield and fleeing up the hill.

"She ditched us!" Amy said in shock.

"Now you see why are aren't dating anymore." Grub answered.

"And here I thought it was your bathing habits." Amy answered, "So what do we do?"

"Hold the line, and pray she's either wrong or that the Shepherd isn't interested in us."

"I don't like those plans."

"When are you going to like my plans?"

"When you come up with better ones."

The shield cracked again, and Amy refocused on buttressing their protective dome.

"Fine," She muttered, " I'll complain about your plans if we survive this. But I swear I am going to teach you sexy if it kills me."

\* \* \*

Harley looked down the mountain as they climbed and froze, the Wendigo were charging up the trail behind them.

"We've got company." Harley said, putting a hand on Bridger's shoulder and pointing.

"Damn, they only gave us what, a five minute head start? That can't be good."

"I hear you. I hope Amy is alright. The last conversation we had before this wasn't a pleasant one. I'd like a second chance to maybe hear her out and heal things."

"You may have a chance," Lady Purge said stepping into view from nowhere beside the two men, "They were alive when I left them. The shield broke, but they mended it in time. The problem is that the Pale Shepherd is coming, you remember him from the mine yes? Somebody had to warn you, and if the Shepherd is here, the stakes have risen. You're going to need my help."

"I don't want your help. Last time your help was pretty close to fatal. We can follow the trail quite fine without you." Harley answered.

"You tried to go up the mountain by the trails?" Lady Purge asked, "But those are for city folk. Those are traps and tourist traps at best. Designed to keep you from ever going into the wild places, the magical places, the shrines and places of ancient power. You'll never find enlightenment on the trail you must venture into the woods."

"You don't consider this venturing into the woods?" Bridger asked.

"I consider this tourism." Lady Purge answered, "And tourism is dangerous these days."

## Verse Eight: How it Ends

Harley stared at lady Purge as the tiny women stood with crossed arms, "What makes you think I'm going to trust you again, after the lies your coven told me last time?"

Lady Purge shook her head, "The story isn't giving us a lot of options. The Locust King has been living parasitically off every other story he could find and cannibalize. And now he's pushed everything to the breaking point. The Old Ones are taking a direct interest in the proceedings, ancient forces are walking openly through the story. There is no guarantee any of us will survive. The story, our story, is doing what it can to push us all to the final act- in the hopes that we can make things work- but stories can, and do, die. Nobody tells the stories of Çatal Hüyük any more. Nobody tells the stories of Göbekli Tepe. Nobody knows the stories told at Stonehenge, no matter what the Neo-pagans pretend. We don't know their stories. Their stories died."

"And?"

"And our story is next. The Witches and the Wizards have kept our story alive on life support by resisting the Locust King for generations. We have held the line until the Storyteller reappeared to teach the Kudavbin King and the Last Princess the true story, to summon First Mother to lead the tribe to freedom and find First Hero."

Harley shook his head, "I hear you, but that doesn't change the fact that what I heard from your and your coven earlier didn't match how you treated me and the kids. You tried to use us like pawns in your own game. And hearing you now, I hear the same oily attempts to manipulate me being tried all over again. You can do whatever you want, but I won't take your help."

Bridger looked back at the tiny woman and then to Harley, "You were willing to listen the Witchdoctor guy pretty easily, why is this different?"

"Track record," Harley answered, "I listened to her before."

"And you are still alive," Lady Purge said.

"No thanks to you." Harley answered.

"You think not?"

Bridger noticed Harley's shoulder's tense, and again the younger man closed his eyes and took several slow breaths.

"Agent Bridger," Harley said in a slow, carefully neutral voice, "We should keep going."

Bridger decided against arguing with the younger man, and turned up the hill. As he did, Bridger felt the earth rumble and shift beneath his feet. He looked up the trail and his eyes widened as the sun blotting form of the guardian spirit rose up out of the earth ahead of them. Bridger looked at Harley, who was staring acidly at Lady Purge. Harley didn't say anything, his giant flanged mace materialized in his hand and Harley leaped at the colossal bear without a moment of hesitation. The Great Bear swung an massive earth and stone paw and batted Harley to the ground, sending him sprawling and the mace skittering away across a bank of shale.

"That was smooth." Bridger said.

"I'm aware." Harley managed to say through a gasping cough.

"I was serious," Bridger said, "You didn't falter at all in the summon or whatever you call it."

"Are you sure you don't want my help?" Lady Purge asked.

"I'm not even sure you left Amy alive now." Harley snapped, anger showing in his voice.

"I'll take your help," Bridger said, "Night can do things a person shouldn't be able to do, but it doesn't help against this thing, and my gun is useless. I could try my taser I guess."

"It won't work," Lady Purge chuckled, "But I need the word of the Storyteller, not the word of an untrained initiate. My help comes with a price. I will save you now, you must save me later."

Harley scrambled, shimmering from point to point on his hands and knees, clearly using the seven league walking technique to bellow crawl and the Bear Spirit brought monster limbs crashing down like falling boulders.

"That sounds even worse when you put it that way." Harley said as he reached Bridger and Lady Purge.

"Do you see another option? You still lack the necessary improvisational skill. You can't flow, you can't play jazz."

"I absolutely can play jazz."

"But not free jazz." Lady Purge said smugly.

"Nobody but the best can play free jazz."

"Marion can, and if you can't then you aren't going to beat this thing."

The guardian flung itself at the group. Harley Grabbed Bridger and stepped about twenty feet down the hill, while Lady Purge stepped just a yard or so off to the left.

"We aren't going to beat this without help, Night." Bridger said as he reoriented himself.

"Her coven practically used us a ritual sacrifice, including Maia, a little girl!"

"I'm not telling you to trust her. I'm telling you to do what's necessary. I had to accept that choice in the diner! You have to accept it here!"

The stone bear charged and Harley again stepped about twenty feet further down the hill.

"I don't want her help!" Harley answered.

"Be reasonable Night! We're going backward here. We don't have another option."

Harley's shoulders slumped and he nodded, "Fine, Do your thing. You can screw us over later."

Lady Purge stepped the forty five feet or so that separated them and stood in front of the two men. The enormous earthen bear towered above the team. It raised itself up on its hind legs and towered even more. Harley braced himself as Lady Purge stepped forward. The Colossus of earth and stone tilted a moss encrusted head to look at the tiny wizened old women, and then slowly dropped back to all fours.

"I see you remember me." Lady Purge said in her bird whistle voice, "I've come to call in my favor. Let them pass and your debt to me is paid."

The Bear spirit roared, sounding more like grinding stone than an animal, like a mountain falling down around them.

"I don't care." Lady Purge said.

The Bear snarled and snapped jaws filled with sharp shale fragment teeth.

"You've done your job and they've found a way to cross the threshold."

The bear roared.

"No, you are not abandoning a sacred duty. You know your ultimate duty is to the story."

This meets your obligation. Nobody will think less of you."

"Is she consoling it?" Bridger asked, shaking his head.

"That's what I'm hearing."

Lady Purge continued to speak to the Mountain Guardian.

"Yes, we're all very impressed. Yes, It's a lovely avatar, intimidating and regal and ominous all in one. You're very good at your job. But now it's time for the next stage of the story. Look around, this chapter needs to end or the story could break. Yes, you've done your part. No, I know he still needs to learn a lot, but that will have to come later. Yes, I'll take responsibility. Yes, I make sure he gets there. Thank-you. I appreciate the gesture."

The giant bear stood up on its hind legs again and then dramatically took a step back and moved out of the group's path.

"There you go. Your path is clear," Lady Purge said, "Feel free to continue not trusting me."

"I will." Harley answered.

\* \* \*

Henrietta loaded her last deer slug into the shotgun as Wendigo clawed at rips in the shield. The Witchdoctor pointed an open palm at one of the holes in the shield and closed his eyes. Henrietta watched as the shield resealed before her eyes. She glanced back at the two children and the young man resting in the booth near the back, all muttering arcane prophetic ramblings, creating a truly disquieting ambient noise. The young man, Henrietta thought his name was Marty or something similar seemed not to be entirely present, he was literally fading in and out of focus as she watched.

"Are we going to make it?" She asked as the Witchdoctor opened his eyes.

"It all depends. Things are falling apart, but that isn't the problem. Well, it is the problem, but only because the Locust King couldn't let things be."

"What do mean, 'couldn't let things be?'" Henrietta asked, chambering the final slug and watching for holes in the shield that might warrant using her last shot.

"The key is control of the story. It comes back to staying on message. Why did the church hate Martin Luther for translating the bible into German? Why do so many dictators print official books on how to think and act? Why do so many oppressive regimes ban books or music or words or films or puppet shows? Control of the message. The story is more important than

reality. People who live in reality can be taught to kill in order to stay alive. People who live in the story can be taught to die in order to stay in the story."

"Because they're control freaks?"

"Because people won't willingly enact a story that gives them virtually no benefits unless they think they have no other option, unless they think that there is no other story. The Bonelands can hold a multitude of stories, a near infinite number of Shadowlands full of different peoples with different stories. But to run the story that the Locust King wants, people have to believe that no other story is possible. Otherwise they'll leave the Locust King's story in droves- because the Locust King's story only benefits the people on top."

"So it really is the Illuminati?"

"After a fashion, although not at all really. But sort of, I guess, from a certain point of view."

"So how's that relate to us living or dying?"

"The Locust King made the Shadowlands, and the Bonelands really, so brittle that the stories are breaking apart. Everything is bleeding into each other, but it's all failing, dying before our eyes. Have you looked outside lately, at the holes in the sky?"

"I was trying not to. But, fine, what about them?"

"A story is just a layer of meaning spread over the world. A reason 'why' applied to the cold uncaring facts of the universe. A story, and the Shadowlands it sustains, only survive as long as people believe in them. Whether we live or die, depends on whether enough people still believe in the story where we matter. Otherwise, we die along with the story. Although if I'm honest, the story might still kill us to increase dramatic tension before finale."

"You are not boosting my confidence a whole lot, you know that?"

"I know."

\* \* \*

They stood in front of the last Torii Gate. Beyond the gate was a sheer cliff going straight up. The trail stopped.

"It's up that cliff isn't it?" Harley asked. Lady Purge nodded.

"I'm rubbish at stepping to places I can't see. And I've never been there before. That's not fair. I've inherited Marion's luck."

"What about her? She can do the same move. Why can't she jump us?" Bridger asked.

"It is your initiation. In order for my actions to be part of your initiation, you would have to make an active sacrifice for me. There would need to be an exchange of equivalent value. That's why I couldn't help you with the guardian for free either." Bridger looked down at the enormous Bear Guardian, still visible from where he stood. Then Bridger saw something. He pointed.

"What are those?"

Behind the Bear Spirit, further down the hill something had emerged from the shadows of the forest, several large somethings- oil slick black with a gilded sheen and large arms and bellies and impossible heads with what resembled a peeled orange for a mouth.

"The Midwives." Lady Purge gasped like a broken flute.

The bear spirit turned to look at the Midwives and then without additional motion or ceremony collapsed back into the landscape.

"Am I insane, or did the Bear thing just run away?"

"They are dangerous. They devoured the rest of my coven." Lady Purge said.

"Well, they certainly don't look like they plan to serenade me." Harley said.

"Do you consider the sounds of digestion to be a serenade? Because if so then you might be right."

"This shouldn't be happening," Bridger shook his head, "Why can't we get away from these things? This shouldn't be happening."

"Of course not. But don't forget, the story cheats. To serve a drama, to serve its own narrative ends, the story will cheat. The story will manipulate you. The story will manipulate the plot and the reader to serve its goals. You will run out of gas after you fill the tank. Your gun will be empty when you're sure you loaded it. Your cell phone will lose signal. You will drop the knife. You will stumble on an empty street. Because the story is your only god and you can't escape it. The story will manipulate you by using structures and plot devices like the hero's journey, and based on the rhythms of life and the tribal structure. The story will build you up and then let you fall, because that keeps you reading. Pattern pattern pattern and then, wham! Curve ball! Cliffhanger! Shocking twist! Never trust the story."

\* \* \*

Marion stood beneath the last Torii gate looking up the cliff. He looked down at the approaching creatures and their hooded master through a tear in the sky.

"Right, so he said the top, I guess I need to get right to the top. As far as I know, I can't fly. Maybe I can feel for a way. Trusting my gut seems to be what powers most of my super moves."

Marion closed his eyes and the darkness surrounded him in the landscape of his mind. He found himself back in the deep space of one of his earliest visions, the one that had come to him as he stood pantless in his former apartment kitchen. Marion was adrift in deep space and as he allowed the vision to gain traction, he found he could feel the frigid cold of deep space. Was he actually cold? Marion found himself wondering if he was experiencing deep space as it actually was, or as his mind felt that it must be.

Before him Marion saw a great spreading nebula, fiery tendrils of unborn and half born stars coiling in the darkness. The nebula mimicked the appearance of burning feathers, pink and orange and fuchsia and deep crimson. Vaguely Marion became aware that the scene was moving, and as he focused he realized that the nebula was shifting its shape, slowly morphing before his eyes into a symbol, a glyph that looked like great bird.

\* \* \*

"Marty's gone, or whatever his name is!" Henrietta said as she slammed the butt of her shotgun repeatedly into the face of a wendigo as it tried to clamor through the latest hole in the mystic shield.

"Did you see him go? What did it look like?" The Witchdoctor asked, his arms outstretched, sweat beading off his forehead as he tried to hold the shield in place.

"He just kind of faded out." Henrietta answered.

"Sounds like he's Dreamwalking. Let's hope he knows where he going."

\* \* \*

"So you're telling me you won't step us up to the top of the mountain, even though we're all going to die if you don't?" Harley asked in disbelief, shaking his head.

"I'm saying it wouldn't do any good," Lady Purge answered.

"There needs to be an exchange or a sacrifice on your part. Otherwise it isn't your victory and it isn't your initiation."

"What about the bear guy?"

"You promised to save me, in exchange for me saving you- remember? Equivalence is key here."

"So what would be equivalent?"

"This is something that only I can give you, something you can do for yourself. You need to offer up something of the same value."

"You're a full blown witch. Everything about this crazy world that I can do, you guys taught me. There is nothing I can do that you can't do."

Lady Purge pursed her lips and looked down at the fast approaching midwives and the slow but unstoppable form of the Pale Shepherd just behind them. Then she snapped her fingers.

"There is one thing. One thing you can do that I can't. Boneshaker. Only the Walker can summon Boneshaker. Give me Boneshaker- It's equivalence in the extreme."

"That's my only defense in this world!" Harley objected, "You said yourself that we're heading for the final confrontation. You want me to do it without the only weapon that does anything?"

"If you have another idea, I am entirely willing to listen."

"Just give me a moment." Harley said.

"Not to be a fly in the soup," Bridger said, "But a moment may be too long. What's it going to be Night? Do we play the game or do we dump everything down the sink and give up?"

\* \* \*

Marion was not alone.

Something echoed in the darkness. Not words, but still a message nonetheless. Not telepathy. A weird knowing, as though Marion were remembering a message sent long ago.

YOU ARE NOW

"I am now what?" Marion said.

YOU ARE HERE AND YOU ARE NOW

"I don't understand. What do you mean?" Marion asked.

I DO NOT MEAN  
BUT YOU DO  
AND SO YOU ARE HERE AND YOU ARE NOW

"What are you?"

YOU ARE

"Are you the Firebird?"

WHAT YOU MAKE OF ME

Marion started at the light burning in the darkness trying to make sense of what he had heard. Staying in the vision was getting difficult and he suddenly had the sense that his time was supposed to be up, that his audience was over and he had overstayed his welcome.

Marion hung on, curious what might be seen after the curtain was to have dropped. The light stretched and widened into a circle of burning starlight. Marion could feel reality pulling him back, but he focused as best he could and watched as the ring of light split as though it were a bacteria undergoing cell division, splitting into two and then doing so again and again, the ring coiled into the distance until they had formed a great hoop themselves. Marion found himself being pulled back, despite his best efforts and so he watched as he was dragged away. And as he was pulled back he saw that circled continue to nest outward in a fractal pattern, each new circle was a small circle in a larger wheel. Circle within circles stretched from the microcosm to the macrocosm, and Marion had not sense of them ending, they seemed infinite. And yet as Marion was pulled further and further backwards he suddenly has the sense of a limit, some boundary that he was having trouble understanding. He had the sense of the boundary in a way the he felt might be not unlike how a fish might perceive the shore, the edge of reality, the edge of time maybe.

He stared at the infinite fractal circles and suddenly they cracked, each circle breaking open at a single point along their diameter.

The circles unfolded into an impossibly huge fractal tree of light. Marion was losing control and his vision was wavering, but he watched as the lines separated from each other and formed a neat straight line with spaces between, not unlike morse code made of light. And as he struggled to keep watching, Marion felt something pushing or perhaps pulling him out of himself or perhaps back to himself- he couldn't tell, but he was losing the state that he had maintained earlier. And finally he found himself sitting on the dirt in front of Harley, a tiny old woman carrying a huge mace and a man dressed like a federal agent who looked familiar.

"I told you I could find him," the old woman said.

"Hi Harley, Hi ma'am, Hi scary agent guy, please don't kill me."

"I'm not going to kill you."

"It's good to hear you sounding lucid Marion."

Marion looked around, they were perched on top of large just of stone jutting out of the mountain. Looking down over the edge, Marion could see the last Torii Gate some fifty feet below, the horde of monsters and the Hooded Figure stood at the base of the rock looking up. Behind the big things, scrambling up the hill was an army of Wendigo.

"It's nice to see that things have gone more insane since I saw you last time." Marion said.

"You saw the Mystery didn't you?" The woman asked, "You saw the Firebird."

"Maybe. It was impressive and terrifying. But kind of useless."

Lady Purge shook her head, "It's always useful, but the old ones are hard to understand. Most don't experience time in the way we do. To some of them, time is like place is to us, something that they can move through. To them the past is like north, just another direction in which they can travel. Other old ones experience the universe without time, don't ask me to explain how that works, neither of our minds are built for that. Others experience time all at once. Some of them experience time in a compressed loop where all events are just variations on some original event and everything that's happening is an alternate version of the same story, like a comic book multi-verse."

"You read comic books?"

"Only if it's by Grant Morrison or Alan Moore, professional courtesy."

"So now what do we do?" Bridger asked.

Lady Purge shook her head, "The question is, what will you do. I have no more part to play in this."

Harley looked up sharply, "I gave you Boneshaker, and now you're cutting and running? I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"Wow, what did you do to under Harley's skin?" Marion asked.

"You gave me Boneshaker and I used it as a power amplifier." Lady Purge said, "With a conduit to the power of the Storyteller, I cheated you to the top of the mountain and pulled your counterpart out of the briar patch inside which he was trapped. But that was not a simple act,

that took a great deal of power. Even the enormous reserve of power that the Storyteller wields was not enough on its own. I couldn't get away with just using your power. I had to use my own."

Marion suddenly noticed that the woman wasn't fully opaque, he could see through her.

"I had to use a lot of my own power. Maybe it was guilt. We did screw you over when we first met. Maybe it was cowardice. I really don't want to face the Pale Shepherd and his midwives. I saw them for what they were right away, and I can't beat them. I'll let you judge. But this is it. I burned myself out bringing you two here together. So now you're on your own. And you are right, this is the beginning of the end, so gird your loins children. Because now it gets dangerous."

"I promised to save you." Harley said, and Marion noticed guilt in his friend's voice.

"You'll have to remember that next time we meet then."

"You just sacrificed yourself. How will we meet again?"

"Have you not been paying attention? The story is a circle. We always meet again."

Lady Purge faded away, merging with the sky until nothing was left but a memory.

Marion looked back down. The Wendigo had surrounded the summit crawling up and over each other, climbing up the sheer cliff, ravenous and ready to attack. Marion looked down at the Wendigo and then back at Harley, "Maybe you should have asked for your mace back."